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OR, THE BAD MEN of MINERAL BAR.

A Romance of Sunken River.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "DOUBLE-SHOT
DAVE," "GILT-EDGE JOHNNY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A WEARY PILGRIM.

"SOME one's a-comin', so better stow yer
whist till we see ef it's ther boss."
"Boss, nothin'! It's a weary pilgrim. I kin
see ther top ov his tile, an' kin jedge all ther
rest. Is he wu'th ther skinnin'? I sh'u'd say
not."

The speakers were men of unpleasant appear-
ance, and they had an auditory like to themselves
in every respect.

Six men huddled on the very tip-top of the
divide, and if they were met there for any good
purpose their looks strangely belied them.

THE BLOW SENT THE VILLAIN STUMBLING STRAIGHT ALONG THE UNCERTAIN BRIDGE.

In the thriving town of Mineral Bar, which lay at the foot of the south side of the divide, the first speaker was known as Bandy Bruce.

The man who answered him was Tom Truefit, according to his own statements, though he was generally called Tommy Twofoot by the members of the tough circle in which he moved.

The four others had names which had been more or less altered and amended, to suit the whims or tastes of their acquaintances, and if it appears necessary they will be mentioned in due time.

At all events, the six looked very much like a gang of conspirators, if like nothing worse. One and all, they kept their eyes fixed on the trail which led down the north slope of the divide, waiting for an opportunity to inspect the man whose whistle they heard at some distance, and who was slowly coming nearer.

"Reckon, then, thar'll be no bizness. Don't yer think it'd bin jest ez well ef we hedn't all bin hyer together. 'Fears ter me it kinder looks bad."

"Blame ther looks!" hastily interrupted Tommy.

"I take it back. The rest ov you skoot inter ther bresh, an' me an Bandy'll see w'ot he has in his kicksies. Looks better than I feared."

"But, ef ther boss—"

"He never said nothin' ag'in' a stroke ov work when ther job war jest slung at ye. It's a chainece sech ez we can't afford ter throw away. Lay low, now, tell ye hear me talk, an' then be on hand. About one minnit more an' he'll be ready fur ther slaughter."

Bandy did not appear entirely satisfied with the prospect of a stock operation under the circumstances, but he held his ground, while the other four melted out of sight with a celerity and a silence which spoke well for their training.

The whistler was so free from care Bruce might have interrupted still further with a classical quotation, had he been up in his Horace; and he had opened his mouth to give vent to an opinion of his own when Twofoot turned on him with a savage scowl, at the same time allowing a cocked revolver to fall into line with his head.

"Jest hold yer yawp, Bandy. Suthin' hez got ter be did, an' a leetle stake are better than none at all. Ef ther boss which you are so afeared ov don't want us on ther war-path he better pony up more ov them duckats he are so fond ov tellin' us about. I ain't goin' ter starve, an' it's on'y 'cause I love yer like a brother thet I'm a-lettin' you in. Ov course, onless it turns out a bigger haul than it looks like, the rest don't sheer."

"Hev it yer own way. I kin give yer help ef yer won't take advice. I'm ez hungry ez you be."

And to show that he was in earnest, Bandy drew his own revolver.

The two men were lying flat on the ground, and were now partially shielded from view by a convenient bowlder. Unless the stranger had been very much on the alert he would not have been able to catch a glimpse of them until they were ready for him.

As a last precaution the pards donned, each of them, a mask; and then as their game reached the crest of the divide, they raised up, cocking their revolvers as they rose.

"Hands up, Mister Man!" harshly grated Tommy.

"Don't make ary mistake about it. Ef you don't knuckle right under ye'r a dead man."

The stranger came to a sudden halt, and stared around him with an air of affright which was ludicrous to see.

"Hands up, I say! Didn't yer hear me? Ef I hev ter say it ag'in you kin expect ter croak. Breath's too mighty skeerce ter waste it on a loonatick who don't hear when he's spoken to like a gentleman."

There was no more hesitation. The hands of the stranger went up over his head as high as he could reach.

"For mercy's sake, hold on! What have I been doing? Don't point those things this way. I am peaceable as a lamb, and it's not the square thing to run the chances of any accidents. What do you want with me?"

"We want yer money, er yer life, dog blast ye! Shell out, er croak!"

There could be no mistaking the savage earnestness of the snarl, and considering the position, the stranger could have been pardoned for showing nervousness.

And after the readiness with which he had obeyed the first order, that was just what the two men expected.

But—nothing of the kind.

The stranger broke into a ringing laugh, that was just as genuine as anything the foot-pads had ever heard.

"Bless my soul, boys, don't! You make me tired."

"We'll make yer tireder yit," growled Tommy, who, now that he was in for it, was ready to go the extreme limit if need be.

"Thar don't seem ter be no use ter waste good sense on yer, an' so—jest once more ov askin', an' then—over ther range yer goes."

But Bandy Bruce had been looking over the stranger keenly, and had a word to say.

"Give him a chance, pard. 'It's comin' on him surprisin', like; but I kin see he's ready ter talk, and I wants ter hear w'ot he hez ter say afore he croaks."

The fact was, on taking a second glance Bruce was not sure but what the contract they had taken was a heavier one than had been anticipated; and the profits to be made considerable less.

The stranger was a young man, clad in a suit that had once been rather loud, though now so much the worse for wear. His hair, long, wavy and black, fell over his neck in unstudied confusion, and the battered tile on his head had seen such service it had no longer shape or color.

And yet, something about him said he was a good many degrees higher than a tramp, and that whatever better days he might have seen he expected to see again.

"Talk? Of course I am willing to talk—even to such a brace of hangdog, skulking, cowardly, pitiful-looking cut-throats as you are. It has been so long since I saw one of the color that I'm even willing to play you are white, and have a palaver with you, according. Say something more. It amuses me so—you can't think."

"It won't be so amusin' ef we fit yer fur a wooden overcoat," muttered Tommy in an aside which he intended should be loud enough for the young man to hear.

"Now then, I don't want no more chinnin' tell I'm done with yer. Ef pard does he kin have w'ot's left ov yer when I git through. Jest keep yer han's up that ways tell I see w'ot's in them pockets ov yours, an' then we'll know w'ot's best ter do with yer."

"There it is, again. To think that now—of all times, now—any infernally idiotic skip-jack should take a notion to go through me, when I've lugged millions around in my time without ever having to put my hands up as high as the level of my chin. Why, pard, I'm clean gone burst. If you can find a maravedi in my pockets I'll give you my note of hand for a thousand payable the day after the luck comes my way again."

"So you say. Reckon you think it won't hurt you to lie a leetle. We ain't lookin' fur much ter-day, but sich ez it is we're bound ter have it."

"Which means, pardner?" asked the young man, his face suddenly growing sober as Tommy Twofoot advanced toward him.

"That you're a-lyin', dog-gun ye!"

Tommy was just in reaching distance, and had his eyes on the stranger. If the latter had attempted to draw a weapon he would have seen the movement on the instant it was begun, and would have pulled trigger accordingly.

Of any other method of resistance he was not thinking, it seemed so utterly unlikely he would meet with it, so long as the muzzle of his pistol was pointed directly at the stranger's breast.

One of the forearms of the stranger went back a little, though still hanging high in the air.

Then, he hit with a snap.

The second knuckle of the young man's hand seemed to be of iron, for it fairly divided Tommy's nose from root to point when it landed, and the foot-pad sat down without the least hesitation, and with so much firmness of purpose he never noticed the sharp rock which left an imprint that he felt for hours after whenever his thoughts wandered from his injured promontory.

"You see," continued the young stranger, turning coolly to Bandy, "I wouldn't object to being robbed, if I had anything to lose; but I draw a line somewhere—and your pard happened to hit against it, hard. I don't allow a gentleman to remark that I prevaricate as long as I am expounding gospel truth. Now, then! What have you got to say for yourself?"

Bandy was not within reaching distance, and had his revolver cocked, so that he appeared to be reasonably safe, but he hesitated a trifle before answering this cool stranger. When he did speak it was with a grin, and a slightly altered tone:

"P'raps, pard, I better say nothin' tell ye're all clean done. You war tryin' ter 'xplain suthin when he chipped in. You better hurry 'it up now, when yer got ther chance, fur he'll slaughter you sure when he gits up."

"Thanks for the permission; but I am keeping an eye on him, and I don't think he will harm any one for the present. What I was going to remark was, that your brethren over at Gordon's Gulch cleaned me out, slick as a loon on a mill-pond, and when I undertook to foot it to Mineral Bar I got lost in the mountains, and you are the first living souls—if you have souls—I have seen for a week. It did my eyes good to see you, and if you had treated me halfways decent I would have embraced you both for brothers."

"An' ez we didn't, w'ot yer goin' ter do about it?"

"Take you both into camp, for the fun's sweet sake," said the stranger, with a slight twist of the uplifted hand, which had gone into elevation again after landing on Tommy's nose.

The derringer in that band spoke before Bandy realized the drop was on him. As he dropped, four men came rushing from the bushes, and Tommy sprung to his feet.

CHAPTER II.

THE PILGRIM STANDS PAT—AND WINS.

As Bandy fell his revolver exploded; but the bullet went high. He was bringing the weapon into line as the stranger pulled trigger, and in an instant more the boot would have been on the other leg.

With Bandy down the young man might have taken a breathing spell if he had not understood his business; but fortunately for him he had a suspicion that his work was only just begun, and he went straight along with it, accordingly.

As Tommy Twofoot sprung up, the blood spouting from his injured nose, and a blurr upon his eyes, but otherwise strong as ever, and twice as vicious, he found himself in the arms of the stranger. They gathered him up, turned him around, fixed him in position, so that one arm could hold him as a shield, and then the other hand jerked out a pistol which had been swinging at the back of his waist.

"Hold hard, you! Not a step nearer or there will be cold meat for breakfast. And that just reminds me—I've not had mine."

Tommy had been in some tight places in his time; but he did not remember to have ever been in a tighter. The momentary pressure of the two arms of the stranger had been agonizing; and even the one arm appeared to be gradually crushing his elbows into his ribs.

"Ouch! Don't!" he groaned, in his pain forgetting to be astonished that so much strength could be found in a single arm.

"Stan' back, boys! Don't you see he's killin' me? It's all er mistake fur ther joke's on t'other side. Let go, can't yer? We on'y meant ter hev a la'ff, an' ef yer hedn't bin a dog-gun fool yer might 'a' knowed it. Han's empty, fellers, er he'll kill me, sure. Let him go by ef he was w'ith a million. We don't want him."

By jerks and splutters, talking first to one man, and then again to the four, Tommy gasped out these words. With that contracting grip of steel around him he thought of nothing but himself. He had not the reputation of being a coward, and possibly if he had not been somewhat dazed by the blow which split his nose he would not have begged so abjectly.

The four men had jumped at the bark of the derringer; but they had not more than got into sight before their pard was between them and the stranger, and that revolver seemed to cover the whole of them at one motion. They halted at his order, fast enough; though they were only biding their time.

"That's all good enough fur you, pard," answered one of the four, handling his revolver cautiously, as though ready and willing to bring it to bear at the first opportunity.

"But hyer's another pard thet hez his last sickness, an' it wouldn't look well ef we didn't try a leetle ter git even, afore we tole him to go on his way rejoicin'. Ef you two hedn't bin so fresh, thinkin' you knowed it all, it would 'a' saved a heap ov trouble. Bein' ther ball hez opened, it can't stop a-rollin' tell we hev did what we kin ter git things in proper shape. An' I guess we don't stop short ov a hemp necktie."

"Now you are shouting!" laughed back the stranger, who still held his prisoner without a visible effort.

"And the only question is, who it is to be fitted on. As for your pard there, he's not half as badly hurt as he seems, and if you would pay a little more attention to him, and a little less to me, you might find it out. If he passes in his checks it will be because you fools won't take care of him when he needs you most. So far, there is nothing more the matter with him than a little ridge across the top of his skull, and a corresponding shock. I crooked my finger a little too soon for a dead-shot; and I am not certain whether I am sorry for it or not."

The young man did not seem to be frightened into giving his explanation, for he was as cool and smiling as ever. And as far as any tremor or strain in his voice—no one could have guessed from his tones that he was slowly crushing a full grown man in his grasp.

Tommy Twofoot knew it though, to his sorrow.

"Oh, oh! Good Heaven, let up! I cave! I knuckle! I got ernuf! W'ot more do yer want? Down him, boys! Caint yer see, ther devil's a-killin' me?"

His voice rose in a thin scream, and about his earnestness there could no longer be any doubt. Up to this time his pards had rather enjoyed his situation, though they had refrained from shooting principally on his account.

The distance was not great, but the mark was uncertain. It was no sure thing where a bullet would go if aimed at one of those figures so closely blended.

Now, one of the four stooped and examined Bandy Bruce. The fact of his being masked had rendered it impossible to judge anything from his face, and he had lain motionless as though dead.

"Guess it's a true bill," said the fellow, rising up from his investigations. "I don't believe he is half as dead as he looks, an' ef pard, thar, are done with his foolin', an' 'll let that chap go, we kin bring him 'round. What do yer say, party? Are yer willin' ter let go yer hold an' pass on, er must we talk biz, sock up to ther handle?"

"Beginning to see the joke, are you? Good boys! You have found out which side is being held up, after all. I don't suppose there is enough wealth in the outfit to justify a respectable footpad in going through your combined pockets, so I may as well let you off this time, but this one thing bear in mind: I don't want any more of such foolishness; and if you try to play me foul I'll take you all in out of the damp, if I have to run you down one at a time, and it takes a year to do it in."

"With a powerful wave of strength he cast Tommy Twofeet half a dozen yards away, and then filled his other hand with another revolver."

"Reckon, party, we mean ter play yer fair; but ef we didn't you'd never know who hit yer. Mebbe you'll know us ef yer sees us ag'in, an' met be yer won't. Ef yer thinks yer does I'd 'vise yer ter lay low an' say nothin'."

"My dear fellow, if it was any object for me to do so I could have you all spotted again before the moon rises, but this is just a bit of fun, pure and simple. Keep out of my way and I will hold no grudge. Get in it again and I'll shoot to kill. So long, all!"

"So long, if you call that going. Good-luck to you, down at the Bar, and if we only dared visit I'd come down to see the fun. It's a tough crowd you will have to buck against, but I guess you will be able for them."

"They cleaned me out at the Gulch on a square game without a flyer, and I haven't a word to say. I walked in with my eyes open. But there's no danger of finding anything of the kind at Mineral Bar, so I guess I'm safe enough. Thanks for the warning, though. Some day I may be able to throw a brick in your back yard."

He tossed the words over his shoulder, but never halted or looked behind him. If any one there had taken a notion for a shot at his back there would have been an elegant opportunity.

But the truce was made in good faith, and no treachery was intended. The stranger passed along down the trail until a bend in the road concealed him from possible sight, and the four began to look over their discomfited pards.

Bandy Bruce was still insensible; but it was a little hard to make out what was the matter with Tommy Twofeet. His neck might be broken, or he might simply be gathering himself together to do justice to the occasion. He lay in the little huddle he formed when he first touched the ground, and it was not until the stranger had been gone for several minutes that he uncoiled himself and began to swear vigorously.

By that time, however, Bruce was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness, and all attention was centered on him.

Seeing that he was neglected Tommy arose, and holding his nose, from which the blood still continued to spout, staggered over to where his pard was lying.

"An' you kids let ther blamed gerloot off without a try ter git even? Blast my eyes, ef I wouldn't like ter hev men fur pards, once! An' pore Bandy a-lyin' thar dead, an' me next door ter a cripple fur life ef it ain't no wuss!"

"Oh, dry up, Tommy! He war your meat, warn't he? Who hustled us off inter ther bushes, an' wanted ter hev all ther glory, an' a good bit more ner all ther coin? Bandy 'll be all right soon, he's comin' 'round now. An' I reckon thar's nothin' wuss ther matter with you than a split bugle, an' that kin be stuck tergether ag'in. Simmer down, now, an' help nuss Bandy."

Whatever answer Tommy might have given to this was checked by a sound that suddenly came to his ears. He held up his hand for silence, and the rest could hear the easy gallop of a horse, coming up the north side of the divide.

"Ther boss, by all that's unlucky!" whispered one of the men, while Twofeet gave a hurried glance around, as though looking for a way of retreat.

"Yer can't do it, Tommy," muttered the man.

"He's almost hyer, an' now, you kin do yer own talkin'. He'll want ter know what's bin goin' on hyer, an' thar ain't nobody knows better, I reckon."

There was no mistake in that. The horseman had augmented his speed as he came nearer, and almost at the instant was in sight, and but a few yards away.

Without the least hesitation he urged his horse up to the group, and then suddenly drew rein.

"What is the meaning of all this? Have you been quarreling among yourselves? Speak up quick therre, and I will know what to do."

His hand swung to his revolver with the easy movement of one who is used to drawing, and a frown covered his boldly handsome face.

Tommy had nothing to say, Bandy was just beginning to gasp for breath, and so the one of the four who had been chaffing Twofeet hastily ventured a few words to still the rising wrath of the new-comer. Very briefly he sketched what had taken place, and wound up with an outline sketch of the appearance of the stranger.

To his surprise there was more than anger in the face of the new-comer, long before he was done speaking.

"And he was crushing Tommy with one arm, while he held you all at bay with the pistol held in the other hand?"

"That war about the way of it. It wasn't our put in right then. He war too everlastin' handy with his shooters, an' when he war willin' ter move along we were mighty glad ter git rid of him."

"And you six let him get away with you all; let him lay out two of you about dead enough to skin, and then bluff the rest; and never one of you had the courage to even take a shot at his back? Heavens! what curs men can be! And I'd give a thousand in good gold coin—ten thousand, if I had it—to have him right here, now, where he ought to be if you were men worth the powder it would take to blow you away! I'd spoil his dev'lish, handsome face, if I never did another good deed in the world! I'd grind it down into sand, and—but enough of that. If you ever have the chance again I'll give a thousand if you take him in in good shape, ready to hear what I have to say to him; and if you let him get away again I'll murder every mother's son of you. Now, no more of that! There are still enough of you to listen, and I want to talk business, chuck up."

CHAPTER III. CHIEFS IN COUNCIL.

MINERAL BAR was not a large city, by any means, but it was as thriving a town as its age, position, and population could warrant.

A year or so before the opening of this story it had been more populous, but it is doubtful if it would further decrease in size, if present appearances were not altogether deceptive.

While there was not sufficient richness in the mines which were in the neighborhood to make it a booming city, and while there was not much hope of new discoveries in the region to which it acted as headquarters, there was visible support for its present population, and there were straggling outposts which could draw their supplies from no other direction as handily.

It lay at the foot of the divide, and on ground which had been prospected over pretty thoroughly. Beyond it, on the one side, was a country which had been more or less explored, with but barren results.

There were floating stories of strikes, made somewhere in the regions that were the least known; but so far their location could never be found, and prospecting in that direction had seldom showed a color. There had been expeditions, to hunt up the lost mines, and search for a treasure supposed to have been hidden, but they had resulted in nothing, and at present the town seemed to be satisfied with what was in sight.

There were three or four stores in Mineral Bar, where a person could purchase almost anything desired in such a corner of civilization; and there were a dozen saloons, in which the liquor sold was very much on the same average. The proprietors of stores and saloons were all making money, though Jack Harper of the Flume had of late been doing the best of all. His place was the fashion, and though he did not personally set out the liquid poison, and only at intervals was seen to handle the cards, he had such able assistants that his presence or absence made but little difference in the running of the place.

He had been in charge of the Flume but a few months, and at first seemed to be none too sure of the ultimate success of the venture, since he retained an interest in an establishment on the other side of the divide, which occasionally drew him away from the Bar.

Then, there was Doctor Rice, who had an office not far away from the saloon, and who had the reputation of being as skillful a surgeon as there was within a hundred miles of the camp. If he had been content to practice his profession and charge according to what the traffic would bear, he might have made money, even in a town like Mineral Bar.

But the doctor was an uncertain factor in the population. At any given moment it was hard to say whether he would be found at his office, at the Flume, or away in the mountains, prospecting.

He was not much of a gambler, however, though now and then he would play a game after a fashion which showed he knew the value of his cards as well as any of them, unless it was Jack Harper. As no one had ever seen the two play together, no one knew how a game between them would be apt to result, for Harper was the chief of the town at short cards. In the list of the professionals, a young man of the name of Billy Barton ranked next; while the doctor was only counted king of the amateurs.

A few hours before the affair on the summit of the divide, Doctor Rice was seated in his office, smoking a pipe, and talking in a lazy way to a companion.

"No, Billy, the whole thing is not a fraud—not by a good deal. Of course, this is between you and me, and it would make a heap of trouble if the thing was stirred up again, just when it has been about forgotten. I had the story from first hands, and have the clew now. Or, rather, half the clew. When the missing part is found, I should say we as good as have the treasure in our hands."

"A clew, you say? And you have never told any one of it before?"

"Never. And there is but one other oqa

knows of it, and he can scarcely more than suspect."

"A friend or a foe?"

"Neither—a tool. He has seen the paper, but probably thinks it lost or destroyed."

"Don't bank too much on that. You are hardly going to let him in; and if you are not, he may make trouble hereafter. It don't take much to start a rush, and it is possible he might head it in the right direction."

"No danger of that. He is just as wide off as can be about the location. He dropped the man who carried the map a good fifty miles or more from the very outside of the range to be gone over."

"He dropped the man?" asked the other, carelessly.

Billy Barton had been fortunate in not having to kill his man since he opened in business at the Bar, but from the way he had used fire-arms on several occasions, it was supposed he could handle them as well as the best, and that a man or two, more or less, on his record, would not trouble his sleep greatly of nights.

He was a young fellow, of slender build, but lithe as a panther, and with an eye keen as the keenest.

"That is something I ought not talk about, but with you there can be no great objection. Red Larry has enough reputation to be able to carry a few more corpses. And after all, he only helped do the work. There were others who had a hand in it, and I never will forget how they howled when they found out they had had their labor for their pains."

Barton's eyes glittered, but whether through interest or disgust it might have been hard to say.

"And that was a long time ago?"

"Quite a while, my son; quite a while."

"How does it come you have let the thing go for so long, without doing a little investigation?"

"Bless your soul, I'd like to know why you think there was no investigation made? There was plenty of time lost over it that might have been put to some other use. As I told you, I only had half a clew."

"And you think there is a chance now to get the other half?"

"I don't think; I know it. Our friend at the edge of town carries the rest of it; or I'm away off."

Barton gave a long, low whistle.

"That is the reason you had an eye in that direction? I thought it was the daughter, all the time; and wondering what you could see in her."

"It might have been the daughter, and I won't swear it won't be the daughter before it is all done and over; but when I got down on the old man's object I couldn't think of anything else."

"And how did you drop to that?"

"Name was familiar; and he didn't have to ask half a dozen questions of some of the old settlers before I was on to what he was after. Then, I set some of the boys to spying, and when they reported a few things said between the two I knew here was the right track at last."

"And you didn't offer to go into business with them?"

"Not a bit of it. I know without asking the old man would not trust me. I'll do better than that. The young lady carries the secret; and if she don't she can make the old man tell all he knows. The best plan is to get a double cinch on, and make sure of the work."

"After that?"

"Then there will be a little excursion. It is a great pity I will have to mix in local talent, but just at present it will have to be relied on. Perhaps it will be the cheapest in the end."

"You will do as you choose about that, though I must say, I would not care to trust to it."

"You needn't, my boy, you needn't. I will manage that part of it. For the rough work they will do well enough, and they can be dropped overboard when the real business begins."

"See here! You are not going to set up a game to harm the girl, are you? I have helped you out on some things that were a little shaky, but I have a line drawn somewhere if I can only find it. I think it would be about there."

"The girl will be safe enough. All she has to do is to open up on the points they have, and make her father do likewise if necessary."

"But, suppose she won't?"

"Bosh! There never was the woman yet who wouldn't tell all she knew, and all that her relations back to her great-great-grandfather knew, if she had some one to ask her the right sort of questions. You won't have to take a hand in that part of the game, and the less you know about it the better. You can expect the move before long if the boys don't bungle their work. If they do I will have to take hold of it myself."

Billy shrugged his shoulders.

"If you want to take the risk, proceed. I can stand the raps if you are not afraid of them. Of course, if you are in the mud I will get into the mire."

"That won't be a terror when we figure up what is at the other end of the line. With the

gold once in sight we can afford to leave the worst kind of a record behind us. Not that I mean we are going to do it; but I reckon neither you nor I would weep if we went out of the camp to-morrow with the knowledge we would never dare come back to it."

"Correct as usual," responded Barton, carelessly lighting a cigar.

"It is coin we are after, and we don't much care how we get it. If I struck twenty five thousand I would be willing to give a guarantee Mineral Bar would hear of me no more."

"Unless I am away off, your share of it will amount to just that, less a share of the expenses. Confound it, Billy, I wish you were a little more enthusiastic! For a kid of your age it is big money you are playing for, and you don't have to put up a cent to see the hands."

"Did you ever know me to gush over anything? I am just not of that kind. But when you want a pard to tie to, Billy Barton is all there. Let me know my share of the work, and it's as good as done, so long as it is not killing a girl. I'll leave that for you if it has to be done; and I won't swear I wouldn't interfere then, at the last moment."

"I understand! You are young yet. I have had my experience of the sex, and I am about to the conclusion they are bad medicine, all of them. But I don't care to have any killing in it, anyhow, if it can be helped. I think things are on a straight string. I only wanted to give you a caution that there was work on hand a little more important than we have been in lately, and to be ready to take up the running when I gave the word."

"Good enough, pard. I am there, as I said before. Give me five cards and I'll show what they are worth."

"Oh, you won't have a hand to play until I get the points on the game; and then it will probably not be a hard one to manage. Keep an eye on things till I get back to town and I will let you know what success I have met with. I think I will go over the divide and see how things are running on the other side, Sabbe?"

"I reckon. I'll cap for that, and say nothing to any one till I see you again."

Barton threw away the cigar he had tried to smoke, and arose from his chair, while the doctor added:

"Look out for me, meantime. It may be I will send for you in a hurry. If I do you know what that means. Good-day, if you call that going."

"I am off, now. If you are going yourself there is nothing to keep me here. Look out for your agents, however; and perhaps you had better give me the roll. There is no telling how soon some of them ought to be shot."

"Time enough for that when they have done their work," laughed the doctor, and Billy, with an answering laugh, glided out of the room.

CHAPTER IV.

SEARCHING FOR A TRAIL.

IN a little, two-roomed cabin, at the very outskirts of Mineral Bar, two persons were seated, conversing; and they were the very two of whom Doctor Rice and his young pard had been talking but a few minutes previous to this interview.

The elder of the two was a man well beyond middle age, who was dressed in a well fitting suit of clothes, though they were of materials made for wear, rather than show.

His face was that of one who had been more of a thinker than a toiler, though at present it had the healthy bronze which out-door life and plenty of exercise is apt to give. He might look something like a tenderfoot, and yet there was that about him which told he would not be apt to leave a trail when he had once camped on it, and that he would hold his own in spite of odds.

Near him was seated the girl of whom the two plotters had spoken.

She, too, was dressed for service, and there were none of the adornments of a belle about her, though she had the looks of a brave girl as well as a handsome one.

The two had not been residents of the town for more than a few weeks, and the cabin they occupied was one rented from week to week, so it was plain they had not come to make an extended stay, though they had brought some little furniture with them, and accumulated more.

There was a rumor that the old gentleman was waiting for funds from the East, and that not until he received them would he decide where he would locate. He had spoken of his companion as his daughter—and such she was, though only by adoption. The two could not have felt closer to each other, and there were ties of blood between them.

"Nothing definite? Nothing to show we are nearer to the end?"

The girl spoke; and her father—for such she called him, whether alone with him, or in the presence of others—responded wearily:

"Nothing more, Edna. Yet, I cannot think we are as far off from success as we seem. It may be it is all a false suspicion on my part but something tells me that I am not wrong."

"Yet the clew is so very faint. The name of Rice, as remembered from an old letter, may

mean nothing. And think of the years between! There may have been dozens of men bearing that name. This one seems to be new in these regions."

"If I only dared approach him about it I could soon satisfy myself, by a question or two; but I am afraid of arousing his suspicions."

"Does it not seem that if he was a villain then, he would hardly be bearing the same name now?"

"If he was an ordinary villain, perhaps not. In the number of his crimes he may have forgotten all about the one of so many years ago. Or, it may be, he has learned something of our quest, and has the hardihood to wait to draw our attention to him. He has been bent on making us his acquaintances, even though the intention was carefully disguised."

"And you think he knows of the treasure hidden by my—my father?"

"I am sure of it. And if he has recognized us be sure he will watch keenly, that, in case we have a clew, we may lead him to it."

"If we did?"

"The same fate might overtake us as did poor Paul. For that reason I have been thinking it would be better, first of all, to make sure of him, and when that business is settled, then look for the treasure we believe is even yet to be found."

"How will you do it?"

"I do not know as yet. Fate will find a way. I have been watching him. If there was some one here to help me! But there is no one I can trust. I might find one of his tools in the first man I approached."

"Cannot I help you?"

"Not more than you have been doing. Have patience. One day justice will have her own, and all the wrongs will be righted. Continue to be prudent. Were our intentions known, our safety might be endangered. If this is the same man, he might think the surest way to attack me would be through you."

"If he only would! Then we would know our suspicions were not so far wrong."

"It may come sooner than we expect. Continue to be on your guard. This is at best but an evil place to bring a girl like you, and I have my regrets on the subject, even though you are not like other girls, and can protect yourself beyond what might be expected."

"And for this afternoon?"

"I will be in the town. The stage will be due, if it gets through on time, which I confess is a little doubtful, and I am anxious to receive the letters we are expecting. And there are some inquiries I would make. It seems strange I can find no one who can at least put me on the track of some one who was among the first to enter this region."

The conversation ceased with this, for Edna was preparing the frugal meal, while her father reclined on the bunk which served as bed and lounge, and while he rested he was thinking deeply. It was well on in the afternoon when he left the door of the cabin, and strolled toward the heart of the town.

It was lonesome this pleasant afternoon. Books were few in the cabin, and of papers there were none. Even a girl with a purpose can exhaust her internal resources, and be wearied out through waiting.

There was a little sewing to do, but it was not important; and the household work was all done. After looking through the dingy window more than once, at the mountain beyond, she caught up a hat and started out and away, with a quick, elastic step. Around and in the house the day was fervently warm, and walking in the sunshine was not the most pleasant thing in the world; but it was not far to where she would reach the shadow, and a cooler air.

The trail followed was one not much used, and she had little thought of meeting any one.

At the same time, the loneliness did not frighten her; and for protection she carried a short but heavily-chambered revolver, which had been her constant companion since reaching the outskirts of civilization.

Edna's pace was light and springy. She passed over the ground even more rapidly than she thought, and before stopping to glance backward, had accomplished a mile or more. The hardest mountaineer would scarcely have done better.

Halting for a little, not so much to rest as to obtain a view of the valley below, she went on more leisurely. This quiet was not like the quiet of the cabin. It soothed.

Further upward she noticed a fainter trail, leading off from the main track, and without a second thought turned aside and followed it.

At first there did not seem the slightest danger in so doing.

The ground was reasonably open, so that she could see for some distance in every direction; and unless she had at least a glimpse of something that looked like danger she would not be likely to expect it.

"If I go a little higher," she thought, "I will be able to get a still better view of the valley than I have yet had, and be able, perhaps, to trace the route we followed when exploring on the other side. I thought then we were bearing too much to the north, and if our guide had not declared he could stay with us no longer than

was necessary to reach this town, I think I could have convinced father of the fact. It is not likely I could recognize the land which he has tried to describe, and yet I might make some discovery. I wish the day was not so far gone. I might have time—"

Her train of thought and her progress both came to a sudden halt.

Beyond her, at the distance of several hundred yards there was a huge rock, and it seemed to her she had a fleeting view of some one vanishing behind it. It was more like a flitting shadow than the figure of a man, and yet she was sure she had not been mistaken.

The action was suspicious.

Had she seen a man coming straight toward her she would not have been alarmed, nor at once have suspected him of evil intentions. She would simply have dropped her hand on her revolver, so as to be prepared, and continued straight on.

But this looked as though the man was in hiding; and suggested an ambushade.

If she went forward her course would take her directly past the rock, and she would not be able to see what danger was behind it until she was too near to retreat.

It might look cowardly to turn about, and might even invite pursuit; but then, she would at least have a little time to provide for it. If this skulker attempted to follow she would warn him off, yet would not produce her weapon until the last moment.

All this darted through her mind in an instant, and hardly had she halted when she had leisurely turned, and was pursuing a backward course.

When about a dozen steps had been taken Edna glanced over her shoulder, and in spite of her courage a little cry escaped from her lips.

There could be no longer any doubt as to what she had seen.

The man had stepped out from behind the rock, and was silently drawing a bead upon her with the carbine he held in his hands. A black mask covered his face, but she could see a dark eye glancing along the barrel.

All this was in perfect silence, which made it the more terrible. If he had said a word, even when she turned and stood as though transfixed, she would not have been as much frightened. It looked as though he intended to shoot her down without a word of warning.

Her hand was on her revolver but she hesitated to draw. The distance was too great to hope to do execution with such a tool, while it exactly suited the range of the carbine. Unless the fellow would come nearer she began to think she was helpless.

She regretted she had not taken to headlong flight at once, for once started she would have had the courage to have kept going; but now, she was too much under the magic of the drop to start.

"Ha, ha!"

The fellow broke into a coarse, explosive laugh, the meaning of which she understood an instant later. He had been but playing with her, to attract her attention. From behind, another masked man approached silently, and reaching around caught the wrist of the hand which rested on her revolver.

"Neatly did, young gal, an' you've saved us a heap sight ov trouble, ez we war jest a-comin' down ter town, a-lookin' fur ye. Consider yerself in ther lion's mouth, an' be mighty keerful you don't git him ter make his teeth meet."

"Hands off, you scoundrel!" she exclaimed, trying to wrench herself away; but the effort was a vain one.

Instead of that, her arm was twisted until the pistol dropped from her helpless fingers, and she gave a sharp cry of pain.

"Sorry, miss, but I guess ye are in fur ther trip, an' ez ther dark are comin' on fast thar's no chance fur a breathin' spell. Jest step out in ther way ye should go, an' ef we git thar afore night, so much ther better."

CHAPTER V.

A MODEST KNIGHT.

"WHAT is it you want?"

Edna had recovered her self-possession, and decided to make no more effort until the supreme moment had arrived. Perhaps, if she could engage these men in conversation, they might be thrown off their guard.

"Wants yer ter move on; that's all we kin say. We ain't ther head chiefs in this thing, but on'y actin' fur ther ole man ov ther mount'in, ez wants ter talk with yer very pertick'ler. When he sez bring, ther party p'inted out are most generally brung, an' you don't want us a-kerryin' ov yer."

"No, no! Keep your hands off of me, and I will walk as far as my strength will carry me, sooner than that."

"I sed yer war a gal ov sense, an' now I know it. All right! Pull foot an' we'll see yer ain't wanderin' frum ther trail ez we go along."

It seemed that without knowing it she had been going straight into danger, for they turned her steps along the very course she had been pursuing. The man she had first discovered dodging behind the rock went on in front. Then, she was followed by the fellow who had actually

captured her; and the rear was brought up by a third man, of whom she only had a glimpse as they started.

When she saw this disposition of the forces hope revived considerably in Edna's breast. It was not dark as yet, but it soon would be, and if they had far to go, as had been hinted, there might be the chance to slip aside, and escape.

For the present, silence seemed to be the better plan. If only for a few moments she could go along with some degree of willingness they might be so far thrown off their guard as to be induced to talk; and you may be sure Edna Lyons was anxious to get a clew to the cause of this capture.

After some minutes of this, one of the men spoke, though it was to the leader of the party.

"Say, pard! You think we kin make the old tree afore dark? Ef we don't we'll hev ter camp on this side er kerry her acrost. Don't b'lieve it would be safe ter let sich a vallyble package run ther chance ov slippin'. It would be, Good-by, John; an' what would ther boss say ter that?"

"Dry up on that. We ain't thar yit; an' ef it hez ter be, can't we kerry her acrost? Bet yer she won't squirm *then*. She hez ez much sense ez ary gal ever did up in caliker, an' I'm reely beginnin' ter be admirin' ov her."

"Yas, but it war luck so amazin' tbat I'm afeered it won't last. Thar war we, a-thinkin' ov w'ot a time we'd hev ter persuade her ter come our way, an' figgerin' how it war ter be done; an' hyer she dropped inter our arms, f'ust clatter."

"Thar's too blame much clatter about you. Next thing yer knows yer will be sayin' s'uthin' yer o'rter not, an' then I'll be puttin' a head on yer. I'm a-runnin' this thing, *now*, an' I say simmer."

"Simmer goes, pard, but I don't see ary thing ter put yer inter sich a dog-gun bad humor."

"We ain't outen ther wood; yit, an' ef some 'un comes alinkin' up we don't need ter tell him ter run 'round an' head us off. When thar's a onhealthy spot on ther trail yer don't want ter be shoutin' it out fur all creashun."

The only answer to this caution was a grunt, but it gave Edna a warning that there was something ahead to try her nerves, even if there was not some deadly danger connected with it. She saw the shadows of evening thickening around them, and wondered how soon it was to come.

"Is it much further that we have to go?" she asked, in a tone purposely faint.

"I have had a longer tramp than I am used to, and I do not feel as though I could keep this up much longer."

"Simmer, please. You'll know when you git thar; an' when you can't go no funder, drop! We'll know what ter do, then. Afore that it's no use ter waste breath chinnin'."

"Indeed, I have given you as little trouble as I possibly could, and you might give me that much encouragement."

The words were whined out, as though she was on the point of losing heart altogether, though she never felt more like making an effort. Something told her they were not far, now, from the old tree spoken of, and that her escape must be made when they had about reached that spot, if at all.

She was right in the idea, for even before she expected it the leader made a brief halt.

"Hyar we are, Tommy, an' I hope ther sight does yer good. I'll go acrost, ter see ef it's all right; an' you an' yer pard kin stidy her 'tween yer. Ef yer thinks she can't make it, you'll hev ter kerry her, that's all. Thar ain't no safety this side ov ther kenyon."

In front of them lay a black line, which Edna knew was a narrow gash in the mountain-side, running in either direction as far as her eyes could reach.

Then, without waiting for answer, the speaker pushed straight ahead.

The chasm, for such it seemed to be, was too wide to leap, yet it was capable of being spanned by a small tree, the butt of which lay very near to the edge, while the branches on the other side projected far out over the rocky footing to be found there.

It only required a few rapid steps to take one over the danger, but they had to be made with sureness. Edna recoiled, this time in real and positive terror.

"Hold! I cannot, I dare not try it! By daylight it might be different, but now I cannot see my way. I shall fall! I shall certainly fall!"

"Hold on a minnit, pard!" exclaimed the man who had expressed a doubt in advance about being able to take her safely across.

"I've figgeded it out, I reckon. Ketch hold on ther rope, an' you an' me kin stiddy it fur her ter hold on by, an' pard kin step clost behind her ter see tbat she ain't gitting off ther track. Thar ain't much chance ter tote her betwixt us, an' she's a hull load fur one man."

The fellow had a coil of rope swinging at his side, and as he spoke he loosened it, and tossed one end over to the man on the other side, who caught it.

Between them they held the rope taut enough to serve for a tolerably reliable life-line. Then

the one who was to guide her over moved up to the rude bridge.

"Go in front of me!" exclaimed Edna, cowering back a little. "Let me feel your clothing with the one hand, and the rope with the other. Perhaps I can cross it in that way, if I shut my eyes. But if there is nothing in front of me I shall certainly fall."

"Yer won't fall ef ye don't think so," grumbled the fellow. "All yer got ter do are ter step out lively, an' don't keer fur nothin'. Then you'll make it."

Nevertheless, he moved on in advance, for it really seemed to him the girl was speaking the truth—and at the moment she thought so herself.

It might have been better for him if he had held to the first plan. As he waited, with one foot on the log, expecting Edna to step to his side, there was a change in affairs as startling as it was unexpected.

Up from the ground behind them sprang a dark figure, striking as it came—first right, and then, an instant later, left.

The two blows were quickly given, and there was no chance to guard against them. Any resistance at all would have had to come from the man on the other side, but he had no idea of what was happening until it was too late for him to retrace his steps, and hardly time was there for him to draw his revolver.

The first blow caught the rearmost ruffian somewhere on the back of the neck, and stretched him out on the very edge of the chasm. The second was not quite as effective, but it sent the villain stumbling straight along the uncertain bridge. He kept his footing, but his arms were spread out on either side, as he wobbled along, and he uttered a number of wild yells that told how frightened he was.

But, the strange assailant did not stop with the two blows, or wait for the other tough to take a hand in the game. He gave a stoop and a sweep, and the first man down was flung into the gash.

He might have shot down the fellow who was balancing on the bridge, but did not care to use firearms. Instead of that, he stooped once more, and this time caught hold of the butt of the tree.

It was lodged quite firmly in its place but the stranger evidently knew what he was about. A tug or two, a powerful shove, and tree and shouting man dropped downward.

Edna had viewed the scene with a feeling akin to horror, in spite of the fact that the man was fighting for her rescue. Now, he gave her no time to think, but caught her by the hand.

"This way, leetle hummin' bird! put yer best foot for'rads, an' gallop ter ther rear. A leetle tumble couldn't kill sich wickedness ez them, an' ef they kim around afore we git a start, we kin count on pistils, bloody murder, and all sich foolishness."

Instinctively her fingers closed on his kindly hand, and without a word of answer she started away in what, without his repressing influence, would have been a headlong flight.

In a few minutes Edna was almost out of breath, but she now had recovered her coolness of mind. When she listened to catch the sounds of any pursuit she could hear voices, calling at one time, and uttering curses at another. The men did not seem to be dead, at all events.

"I'll see you through ther wu'st ov the raffle," said her rescuer, trotting along with a heavy but untiring gait.

"Then, I'll leave yer ter git in ther house by ther back way. I ain't keerin' ter 'pear ez ther gallant rescuer. Fact are, it wouldn't suit me at all. Peromise me, leetle woman, peromise me, hope ter die, sink down stone dead, tbat yer won't tell on ole Bedrock. Jest say yer gotter 'way, ef yer hev to, but, don't mix him in tell he sez ther word."

"As you wish it!" panted Edna; "but, it is nothing to be ashamed of."

"Sname? It's coin in me pocket ef yer don't, thet's all! I got yer peromise, an' that's good enuff. I'll see yer outen ther woods an' then ye kin flicker on yer own account; I'm all done, an' riddy fur a new game."

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN IN THE PIT.

THE whistling pedestrian of the divide seemed to be accustomed to such adventures, since he pursued his way without haste or trepidation, and never once looked behind him. It was still quite a distance to Mineral Bar, and he was not lagging on the way, but there was no change in his long, steady stride.

In five minutes he had temporarily forgotten what had occurred on the crest of the divide, and his thoughts were all for the land in front of him.

"If I am not mistaken, yonder smoke must come from the town, but it looks as though it must be a good ten miles between, and any quantity of crooks and turns. It will be dark by the time I reach it: when I do, will I have to beg, borrow, or steal? I swear I won't pawn my irons; and yet I must eat, and I am not so sure but what a drink is a necessity. My dear boy, you are certainly as near down to bedrock as you generally get, and the prospects for the immediate future is uncomfortable."

Then, he shrugged his shoulders, lengthened his pace a trifle, resolutely driving all these uncomfortable thoughts out of his head. The first thing to do, after all, was to reach Mineral Bar. It would be time enough at that to formulate a campaign.

Hour after hour he plodded on, his step growing less elastic as the day wore away, even though he had at last a glimpse of the distant town.

As he had suspected when watching the smoke in the distance from near the crest of the divide, it was something after nightfall when he at length passed the first shanty.

"Brace up, old man!" he said to himself; and as he muttered the words he seemed to gather strength.

"You are tired, hungry, and as thirsty a mortal as ever tramped across the mountains on an empty stomach; but the chances are business will come along, butt-end foremost, and the pleasure will not arrive till later on."

The words were prophetic.

Scarcely had they been muttered when the young man halted, and looked keenly around.

"Upon my soul! I may be mistaken, but I believe she is here now."

He had heard a low, indistinct sound, that ended in something like a moan.

There was no moon, and the stars gave none too much light. A dozen men might be lying within a dozen yards, with no other covert than the shadows, and he would be none the wiser. He had passed one shanty, but there was quite a vacant space between it and the next one.

"Is it a trap?" he thought.

"From what I have heard of Mineral Bar that would be about what I might expect—though it could hardly have been laid for me. It is coin these hard cases are after, and they ought to know there is little enough of that to be found about me. If I was wise I suppose I would pass on the other side. As I am not wise, I guess I will have to explore."

For a man of his stamp it was not necessary to feel of his pistols. They were always ready, and in order. He simply gave a glance around, to make sure there was no one else to play the part of either thief or good Samaritan. Then, as he stepped toward the spot to which his attention had been attracted, he heard once more a sound which he was now certain came from the lips of a human being in pain.

It was nearer, too, than he had at first supposed, and he looked about, considerably puzzled to know where it could come from. In so doing he took his eyes away from the spot to which they should have been directed, and so came near to having an ugly tumble. Nine men out of ten would have lost their footing and gone down more feet than the average individual cares to fall.

But this stranger was a tenth man, and his footfall was naturally as cautious as a cat's when he was moving on debatable ground. He caught himself just in time, throwing the weight of his body suddenly back on his left foot, while he returned his right to the solid ground. A pit had opened before him, the mouth of which he could even now but dimly discover.

He glanced along the edge. It was of no great length, and he was almost certain it was but a few yards wide. Most likely, an old prospect hole into which some unlucky wanderer had fallen.

Kneeling down by the edge of the pit he called in a low tone:

"Hello, down there! Any one in trouble?"

There was no immediate response, yet the man felt sure his ears had not deceived him. He felt through his pockets and drew out a bit of paper and a match. Holding the paper down so that the flame would not be apt to attract attention at a distance, he lit the match and held it to the extemporized torch until it was in a blaze.

Then he dropped the burning paper into the pit.

It fluttered slowly down, giving an opportunity to mark the sides and decide on their practicability of descent, and finally fell upon the breast of a man who lay on his back, with one arm doubled under him in an ugly way, suggestive of wrenched cords and broken bones.

"Drunk as usual, and as there is no other court and jury the fates have sent him up for thirty days. It does seem to be kind of rough that it has to fall to my lot to fish him out. Can I do it, or must I rouse the town? I'll try it, and if I fail there will be two fools in a hole instead of one."

The pit was of no great depth. At least, the man had not fallen more than ten or fifteen feet.

The side of the spot where the stranger stood was precipitous enough to preclude any idea of ascent or descent, but he had a glimpse while the burning paper was descending of something that looked like a ledge leading downward.

It was possible the pit had been dug by a single man, who was willing to put the extra work there to save rope and raising power. The young man lit another match, looked more closely, decided the way was practicable, and without more hesitation began to scramble down.

"More luck than a little," he thought, as he reached the rocky floor of the excavation.

"Nothing like taking the chances. You can or you can't, and if you play long enough you'll find it so. Now, then, for the victim."

A third match was sacrificed to obtain a nearer view of the man, and the sport came as near to a start of surprise as it was possible for him to get.

The face he saw hardly belonged to a man who would fall into such a trap through drunken wandering. There was an accident here, indeed; if not something worse. He felt the face of the unlucky man, and then his heart. In the glimpses had of him it was hard to say whether or no he was really living.

Those faint moans might have been his last.

"He's alive, and that's a fact; but it's a little hard to say whether he is going to keep on in well doing, or throw up his hand for good. If I want to do anything I had better be about it quick."

"Shall I try to nurse him up here, where there is not much chance of interruption? If there are any bones broken, as I guess there are, it would hurt him less to carry him up as he is; but it is not going to be the easiest task in the world for my mother's only son. Here goes to try it, though."

There was no mistake about the task being a difficult one, but somehow or other it was accomplished, and the two, the one senseless and the other breathing a little hard from his exertions, were on the firm ground above.

Then, the sport looked around again, uncertain what was best to do.

The house he had already passed was the nearest, but it had looked as though it might be tenantless.

Nevertheless, after a momentary hesitation, the fainting man was borne in that direction.

"Nice sort of a position to be found in if any one comes this way," thought the young man, who seemed to take everything as cool as the coolest.

"If some one went through his pockets before pitching him in that hole they could carry the plunder without fear of afterclaps—the mob would hang me on sight, and never trouble themselves to ask questions. I'm not sure I would believe the yarn I have to tell myself. Guess I'll have to stay by him till he comes around if I want to clear my skirts."

In spite of these cogitations he went boldly up to the door of the shanty, and still holding his burden over his right shoulder, with his left hand attempted to give a thundering rap.

The intention was good, but the result was not what he looked for. At the stroke the door flew open.

"Hello, in there!" he cried.

"I've picked up a man that has some arms broken and a few legs out of joint, and I want a little help to see whether he is going over the range."

His voice rung through the room before him, but it awakened no response.

"No one at home, eh? Then I guess we will take possession. This man can't die on the trail for the want of a little care. Make yourself at home, Pony, make yourself at home! If you don't do it there is no one else here to do it for you."

Gently he eased down his burden, and again lighted a match, found that though the room was for the present tenantless it was by no means uninhabited.

The first thing he did was to light a lamp which stood on a pine table near at hand. Then he removed his late burden from the floor to a bunk on the other side of the room.

"Now, old man, you want to come to your senses just as soon as you can. I'll play doctor if I have to, but if there is any home that belongs to you, or any one who has a better right to nurse you than I have, I'll see you to the right spot, and then resign. This thing is growing weary."

Nevertheless, he handled the man with all the gentleness of a skilled nurse, and with all the self-possession of a practicing surgeon. He felt here, and pinched there. He listened to the low breathing, turned up the closed eyelids, chafed the thin wrists, and finally had the satisfaction of seeing the signs of returning consciousness.

"It's a sin to waste precious bourbon on an utter stranger, who is too far gone to appreciate it," he muttered, as for the third or fourth time he held his own private flask to the blue lips, and watched for the effect of the few drops he squeezed into them.

"It was almost empty to start with, and I suppose, when he comes around, I'll have to sacrifice the rest of it; but it was a good thing, after all, I did not empty it when I was so sorely tempted to-day. Ah! Here he comes, now."

Sure enough, there was a faint flush of returning color, a twitching of the eyelids, and after a little the man gave a moan of pain, and then opened his eyes.

"What—what has happened?" he whispered faintly.

"I thought I fell in the darkness. Where is Edna?"

CHAPTER VII.

FOOTSTEPS AT THE DOOR.

"If it is the girl you mean, I reckon she has gone to look for the doctor; and if you can stand it being here alone for a little while I don't know but what I had better go and help her. I suspect you are not as badly hurt as we thought, but the sooner those bones are got into shape the less pain you will be likely to have."

The words dropped from the mouth of the young man straight as a string, but he had no more idea of whom the man meant by Edna than if she had been an inhabitant of the moon.

"Wait! Wait!" answered back the whisper.

"Do not leave me. I am not crazy with either anger or pain, and if I am not, then I remember falling, and a streak of awful pain. Did you get me out? And was Edna gone when you brought me here?"

"You have it all down fine, and there is nothing more to tell you. I got you out of the hole, and brought you here because it was the nearest shanty. There was no one about when I arrived, and I know nothing about Miss Edna. You may as well know the truth at first as at last. Now, can I leave you for a spell till I can get a doctor?"

"No, a thousand times no! There is but one man who calls himself a surgeon and I would rather die than pass under his hands. I suspect I will die, anyhow. I would rather trust to you. If you cannot help me further leave me to myself. Perhaps Edna will come back."

The voice was growing stronger. The bourbon forced between his lips was having its effect.

The young stranger looked his man over once more. From his language it was not hard to tell that he was no ordinary miner, and perhaps it was not hard to hazard a guess concerning the missing Edna. The injured man was plainly, but by no means roughly dressed. His clothes had seen service, but save for the marks of the late fall were well cared for.

The man looked as though he might be about fifty years old, and of rather feeble constitution.

"You do not belong in Mineral Bar?" he asked suddenly, meeting the eyes that were fixed upon him.

"Who are you?"

"A traveling sport by profession, and the last letters of my name spell Taylor. As for the front handle it has been so long since I heard it I have almost forgotten what it is. When I get to know the boys they generally call me Pony."

"You know no one in the town?"

"No one, so far as I can tell."

"Would you be willing to stay here to-night, and nurse me, doing what you can to help me?"

"Just as soon stay here as anywhere—after I get my supper. As I had no dinner I begin to remember I skipped the early morning meal, and made a light supper yesterday."

"You will find plenty to eat here, such as it is. Yonder is the cupboard. Help yourself to what you can find until there is time to cook something more solid. Do it at once, and then come back to me. You may suspect I am suffering a great deal more than I let on. If I am not I certainly ought to, for I know the extent of my injuries even better than you do."

"All right, old man. I am with you till morning, if you need me. I've dug graves for a dollar when I was hard up; I won't object to playing nurse when I am down to bedrock. If you think you can stand it I'll take a look at the pantry. My strength went long ago in hunger, and I am living now on my nerve. So, you see, there is a pair of us."

It seemed like a cool proceeding to turn away from a man with a broken arm, and other minor hurts, but Taylor was ravenous, now there was a prospect for food, and it was not hard for him to make up his mind that for the sake of both it was best to give first attention to himself.

The cupboard was not bare, though there was not much of a variety. A pan of cold biscuit and some slices of fried bacon had their charms, however, and with some cold coffee to wash them down, Taylor ate with satisfaction, and in silence.

When he had finished he looked once more at the man in the bunk, who had all the time maintained a complete silence.

"For the present that will do for me; now, let us see how it is with you. Remember, I do not guarantee any great skill as a surgeon, but I have put more than one man together who had been shot or cut apart; and it may be that with such a patient as you appear to be, I can have more than the usual success. What, all do you think is the matter with you?"

"I have an arm broken, an' some ribs badly bruised. I thought it was worse at first, but now I have a chance to gather myself together and fight the pain, I can see what is to be done, and tell you how to do it if you do not know."

"That's enough. If we don't find anything else wrong we will get along nicely, and I will have you all fixed up by the time your daughter gets back."

"I hope it—I know it! When she returns it will be because I am well enough to bring her. And if she does not come—then I will avenge her. To work! To work! There is no time to be lost."

"Very true. It would have been better to have begun some time ago, but I had to pick up a little strength before I took hold. Here goes! We will talk over the other matters when we get through with the patching."

Pony Taylor had some curiosity, of course, and an interest in the young lady who had disappeared, but he went to his work without further delay.

The man had hit pretty nearly the whole truth when describing his condition. His shoulder was, in addition, badly sprained and bruised, but there were no bones broken save the one in his arm; and that one Taylor proceeded to set with a quiet skill that showed he understood what he was about. The splints were home-made, and the linen used was not new, but no surgeon could have made a neater job.

"Now then, with water dressings on the sprains and bruises, and a heap sight of good, honest pluck, I think you will not need much watching to-night; and I hope you won't. I am at your service, of course; but the plain truth is I have had a hard deal for the last day or so, and I need some rest. I can wake up every hour or so, and a word from you will waken me. If you want to send me anywhere I will go; or if there is anything more I can do for you here, command me. But say it now. I don't want any afterthoughts. I don't suppose you can sleep very much, and I have nothing that will help you, worse luck. Grin and bear it if you can. If you can't, wake me up and I'll help you swear at the man who pushed you over."

While he talked he arranged the other dressings. He might not be able to give as much ease as a practitioner, but he fancied he would leave his patient in as good shape as could be expected, and after that it was time to look out for himself.

"Thanks! A brother could not have done more, or a doctor better. If I only knew—but I dare not think of that. I want no fever, or lingering recovery. When I can bear my arm in a sling, the rest will follow without swearing. I may not know whose hands pushed me into the prospect-hole, but I can guess whose brain conceived the plan."

"Better not worry about him now. As a stranger I cannot help you any, and you don't want to weary your brain thinking of what you will do. I notice those set plans don't amount to much, anyhow."

"You are right. My name is Lyons. My daughter's is Edna. She has been missing since afternoon. Say nothing of it. It will be time enough—time enough."

The voice was fainter than it had been; and the words were interrupted by spasms of pain. Evidently the man was in no condition to explain further than he had done; and had probably talked too much already.

"He has some reason for not wanting the outside world to take a hand in, and he hates the doctor like poison. There is nothing more I can do for him at present. If he don't faint in the next five minutes, I will be asleep. I never knew rest to feel sweeter, and I may as well have a trifle of it as to be fussing around him like a wet hen with one chick making a heap of clatter and doing no good."

So Taylor thought, and with his chair tilted back, he tried to watch for the five minutes stipulated by himself.

Before that time had elapsed, however, he had closed his eyes, and his long-drawn, though soft breathing told that he was asleep.

Taylor was one of those men who can set themselves certain limits in the matter of slumber, and live to them, almost to the minute.

He had decided that if he was not awakened by Mr. Lyons, he would sleep for two hours. By that time he would be able to tell whether the patient would need closer watching, and he would have the strength to give it if needed. He was not completely exhausted, of course; but he wanted to be in full working order for the following day; and to be that, required rest now.

In two hours, then, he awoke.

Mr. Lyons was not asleep, and was talking very softly to himself.

"Considerate, that," thought Taylor.

"Wonder if what he is saying is private and confidential? If he is crazy as a loon, he still has sense enough not to wake a friend. There he goes now, on the Edna tack. Who is that Rice, do you suppose? Must be the doctor; and he don't like him for a cent. That is sure."

In a low whisper, which, however, came sharply to the ears of the listener, the injured man went on:

"No, no, Mr. Rice; you think it is your turn now, but it is only a flash in the pan. My turn will come by and by—and not so very by and by, either. You think, with Edna in your hands you have me under the millstone. We'll see about that. Who killed Paul Prindle?"

The question was viciously shot out, and unconsciously the voice speaking it was raised to a thin scream.

At once the babble stopped, and the injured man cast a keen glance toward Pony Taylor.

"I'll never tell you, pard. The fact is, I never heard of the gentleman before, and I

wouldn't wonder if you had been dreaming. Anyhow, it was time I was wakened up. I must look after those dressings a little. You seem to be getting along all right. Swelling not half as bad as I expected, and pain nothing to complain of. You will do. I think I will take another nap."

Taylor had examined his patient while speaking, and without paying further attention to the question threw himself back again in the chair and closed his lids. He was a willing nurse, but by no means an obsequious one.

He seemed to fall asleep once more, but he was never wider awake in his life; nor was it curiosity keeping his senses on the alert.

The murder of Paul Prindle was nothing to him. He had seen too many men killed in his time to trouble himself about the death of a stranger at some indefinite period in the past. He was simply restless, and though his long lashes drooped over his cheek, he was watching the injured man, in default of anything better to do.

"Must have mesmerized him," he thought a little later, as he saw the patient's nerves relaxing from the tension pain and fever had put upon them.

"Just as well if he can get a bit of rest, though I doubt if it will be for long. Wonder what the upshot of this all is going to be? Will I take a hand in this man's game; or will I go on my way rejoicing, and never know the fate of the missing Edna? I'd like to hear something of the history of the two—for history they certainly have—and I am open to conviction that this Rice is a villain; but I am afraid I cannot spare the time just now. Queer way of earning a supper, though—and not much of a supper, either. Wonder what we can scare up for breakfast? If I thought the old gentleman would keep on sleeping, I might begin now. My appetite tells me there is some lost time to make up."

In some such line as this his thoughts flowed. Perhaps he even pictured to himself a face he thought looked like the missing Edna's, and wondered why her father had so little to say about her, when he could find strength to speak of other things.

He certainly had been waiting for half an hour for the sleep which would not return, and in all that time Mr. Lyons slumbered as soundly as could possibly be expected.

Then, just as Taylor was on the point of dropping off into a doze himself, he roused up with a start, and listened.

Outside there was the sound of light-running feet, coming directly toward the house, and an instant later heavier ones in pursuit. Then the door flew open, though no one entered, and at the threshold there was a suppressed cry and the sound of a struggle.

With his hand on his revolver, he sprang silently to his feet.

CHAPTER VIII.

EDNA GETS BACK.

THE partly opened door shaded Taylor from view of any one beyond the threshold. His first idea was to spring forward and take as active a part in the struggle as he usually did when anything of the kind was going on in his neighborhood.

The thought on which he acted was to wait an instant, and know more of what was going on. Perhaps there would be no need for shooting or loud hurrah, and he was willing to save his patient's nerves that much of a shock.

If those were the steps of a woman he had first heard it was possible the woman was Edna. The strong hint that she had been abducted had not been lost on him, and it sounded to him as though she might have made her escape, only to be again overtaken on the doorstep of her home.

"If that is the case," he thought, "I'll wager my little fortune in shooting-irons and cold victuals they don't get her very far away again before yours truly comes into the game. But there may be fun amazing in this before we get through. They don't seem to scare much at the idea of meeting the old man; I wonder what they will think when they strike great, big, healthy me. Ah, she has the grit of the old man! Hope he won't waken till the trouble is over. It would run in the blood for him to want to take a hand, crippled as he is."

He hardly put his thoughts in that many words—he had not time for it—but the gist of them ran something like that. The woman was making a fight to win his admiration, and the odds were against her. He could not hesitate about getting to her side.

And yet, before he left the covert he heard a harsh, coarse whisper.

"Take it easy, ladybird, ef yer don't want ter break a bone. That's my gripe on yer wrist, an' it stays thar tell we're sure yer don't trick us ag'in. An' that's a navy six at yer forehead, an' ef yer raises yer voice above a whisper ther finger on ther trigger gives a pull. We take yer back ef livin', but ther orders war ef we didn't bring yer we must be rank sure yer war dead. Don't fool yer time, but knuckle, an' come on afore we hev ter kerry yer."

"Hands off, villain!" was the answer, cautiously low.

"I do not care to have all the Bar know of the insult that has been offered a woman, but a loud word means help for me and death for you. Go, while you have the chance!"

She endeavored to wrench her wrist away as she spoke, but failed.

"Not so fast, purty. It's a long ways fur ther men ov Min'ral Bar ter come, an' when they got hyer they wouldn't find us, but yer own purty corpse. Better come along afore ther old man wakes up, an' we hev ter kill him."

Then the speaker seemed to catch the other wrist by a quick snatch, and to hold her easily in spite of her struggles.

"Ketch hold, pards," he gritted, his anger rising at the delay.

"Thar are no use ter waste a hour w'en a minnit will do ez well. Ef ther old man comes out, slug him fur keeps."

There was something familiar about the voice of the ruffian, though at first Taylor could not place it. The last words left him no longer in doubt, and he decided the time for action had come, if indeed it had not been there all along.

The door was near to the corner of the house; just around the corner was an open window. Noiseless as a cat, Taylor turned and sprang out. A step or two and he was at the back of the bully who held the woman by the wrists.

He came like a phantom, and was not seen until he had his arms wrapped around the man, one reaching over his right shoulder, the other under his left.

He had given such hugs before, and he knew what would follow. That gripe seemed to the villain to be cutting him in two. His grasp on the woman opened instantly, and his hands went up to claw the air in a mad and senseless fashion. Before he could utter the cry that was being forced from his lips, he was cast aside, and two blows followed, right and left.

Three men were on the ground as the woman darted into the house, and snatched up a revolver hanging at the bedside of Mr. Lyons.

When she came out again, Taylor held an option on the movements of the three. He had his revolvers out, and while he spoke in a low, guarded tone he kept the villains covered.

"Now, boys, I don't want to have any noise about here for the old man has gone to sleep, and he may as well have his nap out. I ought to take you all in, but the bother might not be paid for in the profit. I'll give you just one chance to get out of here, and if you don't take it you won't be in condition to move in about three seconds hereafter. Git and git lively!"

"It's ther devil himself!" gasped the man who had almost had his ribs crushed in, and whose shoulder felt hopelessly crippled from the grasp but lately on it.

"Oh, no. It is only the gentleman who held over you once before to-day. Sooner or later I suppose I will have to kill you all, if you keep on getting into my road, but I'm chuck full of mercy just now, and so, am willing to give you a little longer run. Now, mosey!"

"You bet, pardy. You hold the drop, and we know how you can shoot. But one day we'll get even, an' don't yer furgit it. So long!"

There were three men there against one, but the odds were not in their favor. None of the ruffians were in condition to shoot a close string, and fortunately for themselves they knew it. They slouched away, until their figures were lost in the shadows.

Taylor turned at length. It seemed certain the fellows did not intend to try a siege, and they would hardly risk a shot at the house when there was as much likelihood it would reach Edna as the sport. The presence of the girl counted, just then, for more than she thought.

"Steady, young lady!" Pony said, as he saw her about to re-enter the house.

"Everything is all right if you take things easy. But don't wake your father. They gave him rather a rough deal, but the cards came his way after all, and in a day or two he will be around, right as a trivet."

"Thank Heaven for that! If it had not been for him I would not have had the courage to escape. He is unharmed?"

"Not exactly that; but his harms won't do much damage if fever don't set in. I found him in a hole, and plastered him up after a fashion. He fell asleep a bit ago, and he may as well have all the chance he can to build up. That was the reason I played it so light out there."

He was afraid there might be something of a scene; but the young lady had all the courage of her father, and the ability to master her emotions. It seemed she had suspected something of what the sport told her from the first. She stepped across the threshold as lightly as she could, and looked quietly toward the bunk which held her father.

Her presence seemed to have an effect upon the old man. He had been resting more or less uneasily, but now, though not exactly awake he became restless, talking to himself in much the same strain Taylor had already heard.

Then he attempted to move his broken arm, and at once the darting pain sweeping through the injured member brought his eyes open wide.

"You are there, are you, Mr. Rice? I thought you had crawled off to your hole, to hide your-

self. Never think I fear you. Where is Edna. Oh, she has gone away until I can get ready to strike. Then—"

He stopped as suddenly as he began, and rubbed his eyes with his sound arm; then stared at the spot where the young lady was standing, uncertain whether he should believe his senses.

"Don't be frightened, old man. You are just as sane as you ever were," said Taylor, coming forward.

"The young lady is smarter than you gave her credit for being, and here she is, safe and sound. Go slow, now, for you have no strength to fool away if you want to be up and around, looking after her safety."

"Yes, Edna it is," added the girl, gliding composedly to the bedside, and putting her arm softly around the neck of her father.

"Thanks to this gentleman, I am once more by your side. And rest assured I will not be again taken off my guard. This weapon never leaves my side again while we stay in Mineral Bar; and no stranger gets so near me that I cannot use it."

"And he has helped you, even as he aided me?" asked Lyons, looking over at the sport, who had carelessly thrown himself down in his chair.

"He is an angel, and life will be too short to repay what we owe him. But for his courage and care I would not now be living."

"Don't pile it on too thick," laughed Taylor, seeing the glance the girl shot toward him, and marking the overwhelming gratitude it seemed to convey.

"I have just been working for my board and lodging. I was a wayfarer, without much knowledge of where I was drifting, and this was as good a place to stop as any."

"Do not attempt to belittle your services. We know how great they have been. It was dreadful for me to be taken back when I had reached home once more; and it was the more terrible to go without knowing what it was I had the most yearning to know. If I could have only been sure no harm had come to him I would have felt less like the fight I was making. Yet, I would not run the risk of drawing him again into danger by making an outcry."

"All the better, since they had no excuse for doing you any real harm before I made up my mind just what I should do with them. I did wrong, perhaps, in letting them off so easily, but what would we have done with them if they had not taken themselves off as they did?"

"You did well. They were but tools; and though Mineral Bar might have hung them had the truth and their necks come in the way, what good would it have done? The man for whom they worked could have found others."

"That was what I was thinking. They are vicious dogs, but they bite only as they are told, and even then a steady front and a little display of brain will scare them off. If I am not mistaken, this is not my first meeting with them."

"Yes. I thought they recognized you, though you were so completely a stranger to me."

"Oh, it was only to-day I met them—up on the mountain. They tried to waylay me, and came off second best. What surprised me was that they should have reached town without my getting a glimpse of them again. They certainly did not pass me on the road."

"Not likely, since they are not of the kind of men who travel the regular trails. The shorter cuts are known to them, and the lurking-places. They are of the gang that has its headquarters in the mountain—though it is thought by some the homes of its members are in the town."

"I have known such cases," said Taylor, without showing much interest in the subject.

"Now, I must look our patient over, and then you can tell him briefly what has happened, but there must not be too much talk. As the doctor in charge I must insist on our patient having as much quiet as possible under the circumstances. Your return will do him good; but he must have a chance."

CHAPTER IX.

THE NECKTIE PARTY AT THE FLUME.

"THE question fur ther court an' jury are, how much does ther blamed gerloot know about this hyer gang? He dropped onto us mighty sudden; but war it on'y a big bluff, a good guess, or kin he pick us outen a crowd ef he happens ter meet us at ther Bar, er elsewhar?"

"Reckon he hev got onto our voices, an' when he hears 'em he'll know who's a-talkin'. What we goin' ter do about it?"

"It's blame lucky ez Tommy said suthin' 'bout prospectin', afore he left town; an' they know he wouldn't go fur 'thout a pard er two. It looks ez though we can't go back 'thout we take ther stranger in outen ther wet, an' frum w'ot I've seen ov him it'll be a mighty cold day when he gives us ther chance."

"Don't be too mighty much skeered. Thar ain't no one hurt much yit, an' 'ceptin' ther fresh young stranger I don't guess thar's need ter be. No use ter lay out a minnit longer than we want to."

"You think?"

"I know it. Don't yer see, he's only dropped on ter voices, an' don't know looks frum a side ov sole-leather. All we got ter do are not ter let him hear us talk an' we're all right till we git a chance ter down him."

"An' that won't be long a-comin'. Ye'r right ez us'al. Reckon we'd better slip inter town, an' leave ther boss ter find out jest how things went."

"Two of us can go in, but some one must post him up or he'd be gunnin' after us when he found how we were left."

"Ef you think so all right; but who's a-goin' ter go?"

"I will if no one else cares to. We kin watch ther house fur a bit, an' ef he don't come out we'll know he's thar fur ther night, an' it's no use ter lay fur him now."

The twice baffled abductors had halted when they found there was to be no immediate pursuit, and were taking counsel with each other. It was after the preliminary cursing had been done that the conversation just given ensued.

After a little further talk, all of which boded no good to the stranger if he fell into those hands, the party concluded it was no use to longer watch the house, and broke up. Two of the men slunk away toward the town, while the third made his way along the trail which led up into the mountains.

A few minutes later, when the coast appeared to be entirely clear, a figure rose up from where it had been crouching within hearing distance, and after a careful glance around, slouched away in the wake of the two who had started to enter the camp.

"More luck ner judgment in that," this individual chuckled, in a thick, oily whisper.

"Swear ter m'ussy it's sing'ler how much o' eenterest a man kin see if he keeps his eyes shet, an' lis'sens ter w'ot comes his way. I ain't lookin' fur no gang, but ef I war I'd know a heap fur a starter. So the head center are in ther mount'in, but ther members kin be found in Min'ral Bar! An' ther Bar are whar I war goin', innercent ez a lam', an' not keerin' ef thar war gangs in the world. Ef I could git some confidin' cuss ter loan me a quarter I'd bet ther hull ov it thet afore I'm thar a week I'll be in a heap sight ov trouble all in account ov them same."

It was so dark there was not much danger of this individual being observed by any of the party, whose conversation he had been overhearing; but he slouched along in a silent way that suggested he was more cautious than he looked.

He was of the class who are seldom troubled with either bashfulness or timidity, if looks went for anything. A stranger meeting him where there was daylight enough to get even half a glance would have set him down as a tramp without a moment's hesitation.

Even in that uncertain light his appearance was that of a man who traveled on his wits, and made a mighty poor living by it.

Over his shoulder was a stick, supporting his budget of extras done up in a dirty handkerchief. On his head he wore a banged-up and generally dilapidated hat, from under which his long hair straggled over his thick, sun-reddened neck. His face was fat, and at first glimpse expressive of nothing but good nature, though there was now and then a gleam in his eyes which told of reserves of temper, and a possibility of something better behind the exterior than his furnishing would indicate.

His frame was ponderous, and his step slouching, yet he moved with a noiseless tread at times. If the three villains had been still at the spot where he had overheard their conference they would have scarcely heard him go by.

It has already been explained that the house occupied by Mr. Lyons lay at the extreme verge of the town, and that between it and the next building there was quite a vacant space.

After that there were more straggling shanties, and finally the solid camp, which was thriving and populous for a place of such an out-of-the-way location.

The two men seemed to have vanished for good, and the tramp spent no time in looking for them.

He braced up his shoulders a little as he came to where the light from the windows by the wayside began to reach him, and tramped along the street like a man very much at home.

"Lemme see: Jeeames give me a p'inter er two on ther Bar, but ez he ain't bin hyer fur nigh onto a year, I don't guess they could be ov ary use. Looks kinder famiyler like; but perobably ther ole settlers is mostly hung, meantimes, er shot, er otherwise disposed ov, an' this hyer are a new race, ez knows not Joseph. Ef things is as they used ter was it's 'Ther Flume' thet I would be lookin' fur, an' its boss would be ther bad man ez I wouldn't want ter hev much ter say to."

Saloons there were in plenty, and of various grades and sizes, to judge from their exteriors; but the wayfarer passed several of them without a pause.

Finally, he perceptibly slackened his pace and gave a sharp glance ahead.

"Kin I b'lieve me eyes? Thar's whar she ort

ter be; an', 'pon me soul, I b'lieve she's thar now. 'Ther Flume,' in red, big letters, an' all ther ole lan'marks, jest ez Jimmy give 'em. Now, Uncle Bedrock, spread yerself, fer yer got ter earn yer supper, draw a check, er do 'thout grub. It's hard up yer are, an' in 'bout another hour you'll be starvin'."

Nevertheless, as he turned toward the door he saw that perhaps his arrival might not be as opportune as he could have wished. There was excitement enough on the inside to even cause a man of ordinary habits to think twice before going in at all.

There was no hesitation on the part of the man who had called himself Uncle Bedrock.

The door was near the corner of the building, and between the saloon and the adjacent shanty there was a narrow passageway or space.

Into this he tossed his bundle, stick and all, and then elbowed his way straight through the throng which would have blocked the way of a less energetic individual.

As he came through the crowd there was the sharp report of a pistol, followed by a grim howl from the mob.

"Down with him!" yelled half a dozen voices.

"He'll get away yet! Can't you see he's made cold meat already?"

Then there was a scuffling of feet, and a confusion of cries, and Bedrock leaped upon a table to obtain a better view of what was going on at the further end of the saloon.

It was a gambling-house brawl, no doubt, and he had seen scores of them in the course of a very checkered career; but they always had an interest for him.

It was one man against a dozen; and that one man but a stripling.

It was not that sympathy was entirely against the youngster; but those who might have had the courage to speak a good word for him were a little too far away to do anything more at that moment; and no one cared to cross a certain open space which separated them from the spot where the trouble was going on.

"Hold on, thar!" shouted a voice at Bedrock's back.

"Give the boy a chance to say what Red Larry was doing. If you crowd him so, he's got to shoot, and he don't sling lead for nothing when he begins to pick trigger!"

It was perhaps a half-hearted protest at best, but it gave the tramp an inkling of how the case stood; and it always did go against his grain to see a dozen on one. He got down from his perch and sidled along the wall in the direction of the fracas, in spite of the fact that when others were hanging back it was a pretty sure sign a stranger was running some risk in getting so far forward as to be able to interfere.

Then the leader of the gang had something to say.

"Oh, come off ther roof, Billy Barton. It's no use ter wiggle when the Bar goes gunnin' in earnest. Red Larry's ther last man you'll have a chance to put that bit ov steel inter. Han's up er down yer goes!"

The speaker was a rough of the first water if his looks did not belie him, yet he had plenty of following. If the things they were saying meant anything they were wild with rage.

There was some reason for it, too.

There was one man lying motionless on the floor, almost forgotten in the savage excitement of the struggle that had been, and which was to be renewed, but there were several more who were bleeding from slighter wounds, who were all the more eager to join in the affray.

And in one corner stood the boy at bay.

At least, he was but little more than a boy in appearance, though he had the coolness and courage of maturer years.

His hat was off, his eyes were flaming, his clothing torn where he had wrenched himself away from the hands which had tried to retain him, and he held a revolver out with a courage that never wavered.

So far he had not uttered a word since Bedrock entered the room, but at the rough order he opened his thin, firm lips, and dropped syllables of wisdom.

"Dead or alive, I can't pull trigger without getting some one in the turn, and if I am not away off, it will be you for one. You don't shoot because you daren't. I tell you, you can't crook your finger so quick that I can't have you down. I don't object to taking a back seat till some white men look into the case and say, served the villain right; but when I let a gang like yours take me in hand, or give up my tools, it will be after I'm a corpse, and you are buried. Now, stand back, and let somebody decent come to the front and hear just how it was."

The young man had slipped out of their first gripe, and got the gang to temporizing in front of him. It looked as though he might even bluff them yet, if he really meant what he had been saying.

And just then the leader of the dozen flung himself over backward on the floor, there was the sound of a single report from the revolver in the hands of the young man, the lights went out, involving the place in darkness, and there was a sudden rush of many feet as the gang went forward with a howl.

And Uncle Bedrock went along.

CHAPTER X.

SANDY SOAKERS, THE SPORT WITH A TIN EAR.

THE tramp knew little about the right or wrong of the affair, but it was all the same to him. He struck in on the weaker side.

No one else appeared to think seriously of interfering in the preliminary movements of a lynch court, while that bleeding, motionless body lay upon the floor, and for a stranger to attempt it was a dangerous thing without a doubt. For a stranger of the general appearance of Bedrock it seemed simply madness.

He did not give a thought to that. He was gliding along the wall, and when the lights went out was abreast with the crowd. His spring was a little quicker and a great deal longer than any one else there could make, and before the crash could come, he was in the advance. Then he wheeled and struck out, right and left.

One man dropped to his strokes, and another staggered back, the two together interfering sadly with the rush of the rest, who came stumbling over them in the darkness.

Yet, one or two men got past; there was a curse and a snarl; and then a voice, shouting:

"I have him, boyees! Show a light here, and go slow! The man that croaked poor Larry is not fit to go out with cold lead. He's got to stretch hemp!"

Bedrock located the voice, and could see the situation as well as though the lamps were lighted. He knew if any time was lost it would be too late to save the young man. The wonder would be if he was not killed at once and in the dark. He gave a leap that brought him to the speaker, and with hands on his collar and knee at his back, had him off his feet before there was chance to make an outcry.

As he fell this man was taking Barton with him, but Bedrock was ready for that, too. By a blind snatch he caught the young man in his arms, and thrusting the fallen man aside savagely with his foot, had the prisoner to himself.

"Don't make a fool ov yerself," he whispered.

"I'm yer solid friend. It's time fur me ter git, an' you better go 'long."

That much for warning; then he urged the young man away.

A moment later and they tumbled out of a window together.

Bedrock lit on his feet, but the other staggered, gave an involuntary though low cry, and then stood feeling wildly for a weapon, not appearing to realize he had dropped his revolver in the late struggle.

"Don't be foolin' yer time away thar, young man," said the tramp, with a sternness rather unusual with him.

"Ef yer don't pull foot, hot, I mou't ez well 'a' kept outen ther riot. Ef we stay hyer a holy second they'll hang us both."

"Thanks, stranger, and you better go," answered the young man, with his coolness all come back.

"Sorry you had to chip, as you seem to be a stranger in the town; but I've sprained my ankle, and don't want to make myself ridiculous trying to run. The fact is, I cannot walk a step, and they are bound to get me."

"Rough deal that, on yourn truly, if them wild-cats gits out an' around; but I'll play laigs an' you play brain tell we kin find kiver. Wich way, an' don't lose no time thinkin'?"

He caught up the young man as though an infant, and moved away.

"Straight forward till I tell you to turn. And if anything shows up, drop me and look out for yourself. The hounds won't be apt to give me up, and I can't fight them now; but as long as there is a chance I may as well make the most of it."

It did seem as though they had been able to make their exit without being seen, and that the gang behind were at fault. The two had got some distance from the Flume before the lights were relit, and from the noise it appeared that for the time the pack were at fault.

"It won't last long, old man," laughed the young fellow, as he heard a chuckle from the lips of his bearer.

"But it does me good to think how they must be swearing. If I had my sixes, and two good legs to stand on, I'd really go back and listen. If they don't strike in on the trail soon we may beat them yet."

"In course we will. Ef we cain't do it with our laigs we'll do it with a club. Same time, fur a weary galoot ez hez traveled on his two feet sence sunrise, 'bout a bite ov grub, an' on'y one drink, it's gittin' rough on ther mourners. Ef you could jest think ov a hidin'-place, whar we'd be safe tell I could wrastle with a bit ov provender, an git me second wind, ther prospect fur havin' all ther j'int's ov me neck in runnin' order we'n to-morrer's sun rises would be 'sider'ble more allurin'."

For the third or fourth time the young man gave a direction as to their course, and when they had proceeded a little further, suddenly slipped out of Bedrock's arms, though careful to alight on his uninjured foot.

"I could make it now for myself, if I had to do it on my hands and knees, but I don't like to leave you in the soup; and I hardly know—who are you, anyhow? You have risked your life for me as not another man in camp would have

cared to do, and now I wish I knew you were a man to be trusted. I swear I can't leave you."

"W'o axed yer ter leave me? I ain't prezactly ther lookin' sorter a gerloot you'd pick out fur a pard; an' I dunno ez I want ter run in double harness, aryhow, but w'ot's ther matter with you an' me stickin' ter this ruffle tell ther racket's played out fur ther night? Ef not, loan me a quarter an' pass on."

Uncle Bedrock held out his hand as he finished, and his words sounded as though he meant them. Barton gave a low laugh of enjoyment.

"You are a good man to tie to, no doubt, and as cool as they make them, but you are entirely too modest. For a service like you have done me—but, of course, the quarter is only to be the opening wedge. Say how much more you want, and if those hounds have left my wallet—if? By heavens! You gauged my finances better than you knew! They have bit me a heap sight harder than they knew, or I am wide off. There ought to have been at least five hundred in the book, to say nothing of what was there besides. I'll go back and—no, I won't, either. Best of reasons, I can't. There's your quarter, though."

He extracted a coin from the loose change in his pocket, and tossed it to the man of rags, who caught it without trouble.

"Thanks, boss. Yer understands that I'm down ter me uppers er I wouldn't ax a stranger fur a leetle loan. I can't starve, an' it ain't wu'th w'ile ter run reeks fur stealin' su'thin' ez no account ez a bit ov grub. Ef I stay hyer long ernuf ter hev a chance ter prosper, I'll recomember w'ot I borried, even ef I don't pay it back. I may be keerless 'bout money matters, but I ain't onthankful. An' me, not ser long ago, jest a-rollin' in wealth!"

"I asked you, once already, who you were. If I knew, after what you have done for me, I think I might be justified in taking you where you would not only be safe but well cared for, now and in the future. You look rough, I'll admit; but you could earn big wages if you can keep up the gait you traveled on to-night."

"I kin do that last every night in ther year, an' every year in ther cent'ry. An' ez fur who I be—strikes me looks speak fur theirselves. I'm a good man down ter me uppers, an' lookin' fur a chance ter cooperate. Ef yer ever heard ov one Sandy Soakers, otherwise ther child with a tin ear, yer kin see him afore ye."

"Can't say that the name is familiar, but it sounds natural, and seems to fit. And you say you want a chance. What sort of a chance? What is your little game? I know a man who needs a man; and if I was dead sure you were wicked enough, I might put you onto the chance of your lifetime."

"Wicked ernuf! Holy Hades!"

The simple exclamation was all the assumed Sandy Soakers could utter on the spur of the moment. There did not seem to be words to do justice enough to the occasion.

They appeared to be sufficient, however.

"I may be making a mistake, though it is something I seldom do. If you are in earnest, give me your word and your oath, and you go along. If you don't suit, you will know enough to keep your trap shut, and there can be no great harm done. I tell you old man, I was in a tight place, in there, and not a real friend in the house, when you chipped. I am grateful, but you don't want to make any mistake. If you go back on me they will plant you alongside of Red Larry, and there will be no mourners."

"In course, in course, an' so they orter. But arter sich a shake ez they give yer ter-night I thort maybe you'd be wantin' ter slide out fur cooler quarters tell this thing blows over."

"Bah! To-morrow there will not be a man to lift his finger against me as long as the gang which Larry trained with can't get me into a hole with themselves all alone. It was kill or be killed, and I only saved myself, as I had a right to do. The camp will stand by me, whatever that gang at the Flume might do. Enough of this, now. Give me your shoulder, and I will try to hobble along. It is time I was doing something for that ankle if I want to be out on the street to-morrow."

The conversation closed at that, for without question or suggestion the tramp offered his arm. He could carry the young man if he had to, but he rather preferred to let him do what he could for himself.

Barton managed to get along fully as rapidly as they had been going before, and could indicate their course without a word being said. They were quite a distance from the Flume, and there were no sounds of pursuit. When they had gone a little further Barton called another halt.

"It's not likely we will meet any one, and if we do we must take the chances. If you want to go with me, I guess I will have to blindfold you after all. It is not too late for you to turn back; but if you are the man I think you are, you will not object to that precaution, and it may give you some idea what sort of a party you are going to meet."

"Clap on ther blinders, soon ez yer hez a min' ter. I'm willin' ter go 'most arywhar, s'long ez thar's a chance fur grub, an a bunk at ther end."

I left me bundle ef ther alley alongside ther Flume, so ez I cain't slick up ez I'd want w'en I met strangers, but I jest guess I'll do ez I be."

"Oh, yes, you will do, especially when I tell how much better you are than you look," laughed the young man, as he arranged a handkerchief over the eyes of the tramp.

The operation was carelessly done, as though he had confidence in his man, and trusted to his good faith not to interfere with what was done more for form's sake than through any real doubt.

They went along slower than ever, but the journey did not take much more time. When they halted, Barton gave a rap on a door that was at his hand, and then there was a whispering so low that even the sharp ears of Uncle Bedrock caught nothing of what was said.

The delay at what Uncle Bedrock supposed was the door was but brief. Again he moved forward, with young Barton's hand still upon his shoulder, and he was pretty certain they were traversing some sort of a passage, though whether it was above ground or below was more than he could say.

It was something more than an average temptation, but Bedrock restrained his curiosity, and made no effort to obtain a glimpse of what might be around him. It would not have been hard to move the bandage over his eyes, at least enough to obtain a peep, but he had placed himself in the hands of his guide, and believed there would be chance enough in the future to obtain a view of what he was pledged in the present not to try to see.

"Here you are, old man. Just sink down gracefully in a chair and remain as you are until you are spoken to. You will excuse me if I go and wash my hands after handling such a grimy subject. We will have to remedy all that, though, if you are going to stay in Mineral Bar. But whether you do or you don't, you won't forget that I owe you one, and that sooner or later I will show you I am not of the forgetting kind."

"Don't yer say a word more; not a leetle, teetle, teenty word. You go tie up that laig ov yourn, w'ich must be a-painin' orful, an' send some one hyer ter tend ter my stomjack. I can't stand it much longer, not fur all the soft-soap an' blarney ever eenvented."

"Be patient a minute while I go to explain. And keep your courage up, whatever is said to you. If you hadn't shown such a good stock of that, I would never have given a thought to bettering your condition. So long. You won't wait any length of time."

CHAPTER XI.

BEDROCK STRIKES A JOB.

THE chair into which Bedrock dropped was comfortable, and as he threw himself back he was not sure he was in as much hurry for his supper as he had been letting on. The adventure at hand suited him well enough as far as it had gone, and he was willing to wait a little for developments.

"So it goes, so it goes!" he muttered to himself.

"I axed him fur a quarter, an' he give me a eagle. I come to ther Bar fur rest an' recuperashun, an' it begins ter blossom out that I'm elected fur ther us'l large stock ov hard workin' fun. When, oh, when are ther wooman in ther case ter putt in a appears? When I see her I kin tell to a dot on w'ich side ov ther fence Rufus Primrose, sen'yer, are a-goin' ter be. Rufus, Rufus! 'Cordin' ter habit ye'r a-gittin' in with ther highflyers, an' it's dollars ter dimes yer won't be a-doin' ov 'em ary good."

His meditations closed abruptly, for he heard a soft step, almost at his side.

"You may leave that handkerchief on your eyes for the present, though the room is so dark already it will make but little difference. Still, as your guide explained to you, there is no use in taking chances a bit sooner than is necessary. Talk plainly and to the point. From what I have heard of you, I think you are a reliable man; but I must know whether you will suit our line of business. Who are you?"

"Sandy Soakers, ther sport with a tin ear."

Very gravely was the answer given, but as the name had already been mentioned by Barton in describing the man he had brought with him it excited no surprise.

"Where from?"

"All around. Sometimes frum one place, but mostly frum others. Lass' heard ov from Spur City, a journeyin' to'rads Mineral Bar."

"And in your life time, which, from your appearance, seems to have been somewhat long in the land of the wicked, you have done—what?"

"Oh, anythin', anythin'. I've did so much it's actooally kept me poor. Frum robbin' ther mails ter borryin' a quarter, it didn't make much diffren's. But thar's two things I never did. I never went 'back on a pard ez used me white; an' I never shot a man in ther back. Ez long ez a man's runnin' let him run. Ef he don't turn 'round he ain't likely to do much harm. See?"

"I see that far; but how is it if he does turn around, and has a revolver in his fist? Do you

shoot just a shade the soonest, or do you run away yourself?"

"Ax Billy Barton that questyun, and see w'ot he sez. I ain't blowin' me own horn too loud."

"That is a fair answer, because it was the sample he had of your courage that brought you here. Suppose Mr. Barton continues to take an interest in your affairs, and should ask you to even up matters for him with a man or so of that gang, what would you do about it?"

"Pend on ther 'mount ov the obligashun he allowed he'd put me onder fur ther doin' ov it. Ef it war heavy ernuf I reckon I'd call on ther gerloots ter step ter ther front, smack ther faces, an' then ketch ther drop. A feller must hev fun in this world, an' he can't starve, more-over."

Through the folds of the handkerchief Primrose saw the sudden glow of a stricken match, followed by the steadier one of a lighted lamp. In the silence which followed he knew he was being examined, and bore the scrutiny without flinching.

After a few moments the voice spoke again.

"You came to Mineral Bar with scarcely a dime, as I understand. What was the object of your coming?"

"W'ot's ther object in livin' at all? We don't ax ter come, an' we git over ther range jest w'en we most don't want ter. Betwixt times, we's wanderin' ez fate draws us. It says, go ter Spur City, an' we goes. It says, hoof it ter Min'ral Bar, an' we pulls foot accordin'. In twenty weary years ov trampin' I dunno ez thar war ever a reason fur whar I went to, er sense in my gittin' away, onless thar happened ter be a committee taggin after."

"Then, by your own showing, you have been a worthless vagabond so long there is little chance you will be of any value in the future to yourself or any one else."

"Ax Billy Barton, boss. It ain't for me to say. Ez I'm a stranger in town he's ther only man I kin give yer hyer; but ef thar's time fur letter writin', I kin give yer a heap ov just sich recommendations."

"And you say you can shoot?"

"Plumb center, every time. But it's easy findin' that out. Kin give yer a sample a'ry time. I ain't been a cowboy an' a rus'ler fur nothin'."

"Your looks are against you, but we might change them, suggested the other, half to himself.

"With that long hair cut in the fashion, a clean-shaven face, and a suit of broadcloth, you would pass for almost anything as long as you kept your mouth shut."

"Hold on, boss! Hold on!" retorted Bedrock, as if in terror.

"Sich ez I be yer hev a op'shun; but don't you try ter gild gold. It's a loss ov time an' money. I kin spruce up a bit, but don't yer ax me ter train onder false colors. They'd see ther lion's ears a-stickin' out onder ther borried hide, an' I'd be no good, 'stead ov bein' wu'th big money."

"I believe you, and I begin to think Barton made no mistake when he brought you this way. I think we can use you."

"Fur big money, boss, fur big money. I ain't a ten-cent customer. Ef ther job ain't wu'th rocks thar's no use ter undertake it."

"Yes, for big money, if we are once sure of you. You will have to be tried first, before you can be trusted, however. If you are found worthy the rest will be explained. For to-night, keep out of sight of the Flume, and you will receive notice when your time comes. Be careful how you step until you are posted, for you might run against the wrong men. Barton will see you to-morrow, but let him choose his own time and way. It will not do for him to make too public a display of his affection, for I suppose you understand he is not in your sphere. Now, pull foot for the nearest eating-house and fill yourself up. After that, find a sleeping-place. It will not do for you to make too much of an exhibition of yourself until we decide what is to be done with you."

As he ceased another voice took up the strain, though it was the first intimation Bedrock had that he was not alone with his interlocutor.

"Jest leave that rag whar it are tell yer gits ther word ter take it off. It's ez well yer don't know whar yer bin tell it don't make no differ'n's. I'll lead yer all right tell yer gits out inter ther road, an' then you kin go ez you please."

"I'm jest a lam' in yer han's. Hev it ter suit yerselves. But, I don't reckon thar's ary one tryin' ter play roots on Sandy Soakers; fer ef thar war it moun't cause a onpleasantness. Sabbe?"

"Oh, I sabbe, plain ernough; an' I'll treat yer better than a brother. This way. That's my hand on yer arm."

And in the darkness Uncle Bedrock was led away.

He traveled for some distance without a word being spoken. The tramp was counting the steps, and it seemed to him he had about reached the spot where Barton had applied the bandage to his eyes.

The hand on his arm seemed a heavy one, and, if voice told anything, belonged to a rough-look-

ing man. Primrose was looking over in his mind for some questions to ask his guide before they separated, that should not seem leading, yet would elicit the information he was beginning to yearn greatly to possess.

Suddenly the hand lifted, and he heard the low noise made by light running feet. The guide had taken flight without a word of farewell, and he was alone in the street.

With due deliberation he removed the handkerchief which had so long been shading his eyes, and looked around him.

There was no one in sight, and he could form no idea of where he had been from the appearance of any of the shanties within the range of his vision.

"Alle 'lighty, my frien's. Thar's a big game afoot, somewhar, an' ez usu'l Uncle Bedrock are freezin' onto it. W'ot loads ov fun a tramp kin pick up; an' who'd be a millyunaire w'en he kin be a bummer?"

With this philosophic reflection he turned his steps toward the business part of the town, in search of some place where his appetite could be appeased. Now that he had leisure to attend to its demands the clamor began to be uncomfortably loud.

Still remembering the information received from the pard who had visited the Bar, he looked around for a place kept by one Michael Fin-nighy, and found it without much difficulty. The old landmarks were slower to change than he had thought.

Mike took lodgers, besides keeping a place where meals could be obtained at all hours. Though the accommodations would not have pleased a man of fastidious taste they suited Primrose well enough. Giving the name of Sandy Soakers he made his arrangements to have his headquarters there while in the camp, paid a day's board in advance out of some loose change he discovered in his pocket, and then stowed away a mighty meal as a sample of what he could do.

The hour was very late, but Mike kept open all the time, and after lighting a pipe Primrose strolled away without saying where he was going.

"Reckon some galoot hez got away with my luggage, but it won't do no hurt ter take a turn that way an' see. Ther clo'se ain't ov much 'count, but I'd hate ter lose ther stick."

Without a thought of the warning, he had received, he shaped his course directly to the Flume.

The late excitement at the saloon had quieted down when he stood in front of the door, though everything was running at the average rate of pressure. To his surprise no one had found his bundle, and it lay where he had left it.

"All right, be ye? Better luck ner I expected, an' mebbe I better not be in a hurry 'bout ketchin' yer up. Ther night's young, thar's a coin in my pocket, an' a game in ther house. W'ot's ther matter with takin' a flyer at ther bank? An' mebbe I kin hear a bit ov news fur ther centerest ov me side pard w'en I see him ag'in. I guess I'll go in."

Not a thought of any possible danger to himself appeared to enter his mind as he boldly swung forward with his most aggressive air, and passed through the open door.

Within, there was nothing more to be seen than the ordinary disorder. The body that had been lying on the floor had, of course, disappeared, and with it had gone all traces of the late fracas. If it was not forgotten, every one showed a thorough unconcern. There were plenty of men in the bar-room, but they were no longer excited over the fall of Red Larry. Their conversation was all about something else, and as Primrose slouched up to the bar he heard the same name in a number of mouths.

He stopped and listened in spite of himself. The name was familiar and what one man said was a sample: "I tell you," was the cry, "if he ain't Ready Rank, I'm 'way off. It was his way of old; and before we are done with him we'll see him at the Bar."

CHAPTER XII.

FUN AT THE FLUME.

THE news seemed to have but lately come, and one place in the room was as good a place as another to gather it. Uncle Bedrock pushed on for the bar.

Once by the side of the counter and he turned, smiling benignantly, while his eye ran over the crowd as if in search of a familiar face.

An ordinary man would have had no difficulty in finding that face, or one that wanted to be familiar. The chances were he would have found half a dozen. When a stranger to town made his way to the bar he was seldom compelled to drink alone if he could understand a broad hint.

In this case, however, there were several reasons why the general rule did not apply.

For one thing, the citizens were too much interested in something else to notice him.

For another, if they had noticed they would have thought the chances of wringing in on him for a drink were but slender.

Shaking his head solemnly Bedrock turned away from his search, and faced the bartender, who seemed to be but just aware of his presence.

"It's no use, me noble nibs," Primrose sighed. "It's a stranger I am, sure enough, an' I'll hev ter drink alone. Whisky an it please yer royal highness. An' I prefers ther hot kind, thet warms ter ther toenails."

"Money talks," was the rejoinder. "Pay first and drink afterwards."

"In course, ef it hez ter be done, w'y, did she are. An' look sharp ez I git ther right change back."

He tossed his ten-dollar gold-piece down with a lordly air, and inserted one thumb in the arm-hole of his tattered vest while awaiting the movements of the tumbler-juggler.

"Ah, excuse me, Mr. Floyd, I did not recognize you," laughed the man, as he tossed the change over with one hand, and pushed forward a tumbler and bottle with the other.

"Was afraid you would want to draw a check, and our banks, here, are not in condition to handle paper. Did you bring any mines with you, or are you down to buy the Star Fish Bonanza?"

Bedrock executed a wink that was as good in its way as a circus.

"Fur ther peresent I'm incog', an' I'll take it ez a favor ef yer don't give me away. Sandy Soakers be my gentle cog. Ef that ain't long enough yer kin tack on, Ther Sport with ther Tin Ear. But keep yer eyes on me. By'mby thar'll be 'velements."

"Rest easy. We will keep an eye on you, and if that is not enough there is a switch. Be-have yourself while you are in the Flume and all will be lovely. If you don't—out you go."

With this advice the gent behind the counter turned to another customer, and the tramp felt that for the present he was free of the house.

He slid quietly into a corner, and listened without being obtrusive. By good luck he had the chance at the very outset to hear what he wanted to learn. A man who looked like a respectable miner was just asking who was Ready Rank, and what he had been doing.

"Bless my soul! An' you never heard of Ready Rank? Why, he used to be just the king-pin of all the rustlers. He was lightning along the cattle trail, and a bad man to meet with a gold train. He never got down to overhauling a stage; but when he got hard up, or the notion took him, he just went in and corraled a town. Did it more than once, and got away with big spoil."

"But something happened to him a year or so ago, so they say, an' he's bin off the road fur repairs. Now, it does look as though he had broke loose again. There was a gang went through Gordon's Gulch the other night, gathered in a heap sight of coin, looked over the registers at ther hotels ter see if there was any game there worth the picking, and then slid out without any one stopping."

"Oh, he's a daisy, is Ready Rank, and when he once gets on the war-path there is no telling where to look for him. Seems as though he might be working this way."

That was the substance of the story as he heard it, though there were some particulars added by other lips, within his hearing. It had its interest to the tramp. From time to time as he listened he rubbed the side of his nose dubiously with the pudgy forefinger of his right hand.

"Kinder queer, all this," he muttered, or rather mumbled, for though his lips made a sound, no intelligible words issued from between them. "Thar's s'uthin' mighty mister'ous about it all. Ef he comes this way, betcher life he won't come alone, an' fun thar will be, cl'ar up to ther limit."

While he was meditating he was not altogether unobservant of what was going on around him, and just now he noticed an individual enter the saloon, and come through the crowd with a careless nod to this man and that as he passed along, but not halting until at the end of the bar.

There he stood, leaning forward while he conversed in a low tone with the individual who had served Bedrock on his first entrance.

There was something about the face of this man that attracted more than a passing glance from Primrose, though the latter was careful enough not to allow his interest in him to show itself by anything like a fixed stare.

The new-comer was clean shaven, his hair closely cropped, and he was dressed in irreproachable style. Once or twice he glanced up, but in that fleeting look Bedrock was sure he took in more of the t'orong than most men would have done in five minutes. It even seemed as though it lingered a little the longest, if such a thing was possible, on him.

"Sport she be, frum ther ground up. Wonder ef he b'longs round hyer?" thought the tramp.

"I hate ter be axin' conundrums, but I'll hev ter know afore I go out ov this. Thar's s'uthin' familer like about him, an' yet I dunno him frum a side ov sole-leather. Whar did I git fust glimp' ov him?"

He cast another glance in the direction of the sport, and was almost certain he met the eyes of the latter fixed full on him, and that at the same time there was a frown on the high, broad forehead which had not been there a moment before.

"Don't like me looks, I'm a-thinkin', an' got

half a noshun ter come my way with ther switch. W'ot's ther reason?"

"Jack seems ter be in a bad humor," said one of the men to whose conversation Bedrock had been listening.

"Guess Johnny is telling him about the racket Barton had with Red Larry, an' it don't please him worth a cent. If he had been here things would have gone a leetle different. Wonder when he got back?"

"With ther stage, most likely. If he wants ter run ther Flume he better stay right by it. There never was a better man stepped on shoe-leather than just Jack Harper, but when he's not here that don't count. Wonder if he'll be huntin' Barton up ter make him a awful ex-ample?"

"More like he'd be on ther otherside. Larry didn't get much more than he deserved. Doc Rice says if it had been half an inch either way he would have got his last sickness, but that he's all right if he don't make too much of a fool of himself. Ain't that luck enough for one night?"

"Rayther, when they picked him up for dead."

So Larry was not dead, after all.

Primrose made a mental note of the fact. It was a fortunate thing for Billy Barton; and, perhaps, for himself.

There might be some private scores to be settled, but there would be no call for public vengeance. He had not been particularly afraid of a revival of the lynching spirit without fresh provocation, but this would make a difference in his movements. It was not so necessary to take a back seat until he found out whether he would be recognized as the man who had interfered between the mob and its victim.

He had hardly realized the fact when he became aware of something else. Jack Harper had singled him out, without a doubt, and was advancing toward him. Had he been posted as to the way in which Barton really happened to escape?

"See here, my man, what are you doing here? Hadn't you any friend to tell you the Flume was not the loafing-place for men of your class? Move along if you please."

Short and sharp came the words, though spoken in a tone so low it was possible they were not heard by any one but the man addressed.

"Frien's is skass, an' advice like hen's teeth," replied Bedrock, without offering to move. "I'm a-holdin' down ther bench ther best I know how; but ef yer thinks yer kin do it better I'll give yer half ov it, an' you kin see. Takes a good man ter do it jestice, though."

"Curse you, what do you mean by your impudence? I don't want to have a muss on the floor; but if what Johnny thinks is true, and any of Larry's friends drop to you, there would be something more to clean up in the morning. It's your own good I'm talking for, but I don't want you here, anyway."

"Sorry, John," drawled the tramp shaking his head gravely.

"I'm tired ter death, ez it war, an' got kinder reckless like. An' then I'm a-waitin' tell I git thirsty afore I git a move on. No use ter make two efforts, an' it'll be some time tell I want my night-cap."

Harper shot a fierce glance at the speaker, although he had without a doubt already sized him up pretty well.

The proprietor of the Flume was a well-built man, and those who knew him best would have said he was afraid of nothing, but he did not care to undertake this ragged, and travel-be-grimed individual himself. He looked back over his shoulder and made a motion, slight, but well understood by those for whom it was intended.

Two men were at his side in an instant.

"He wants to go out, bad, but don't know how. Show him."

Harper did not believe there would be serious resistance, but he was a man who was seldom taking many chances, however much he might appear to be off his guard. Bedrock knew without appearing to see it that the hand of the proprietor lay in a side pocket, and he could guess what it was resting on. He made neither answer nor movement.

"Come, old man! Out you go, head first, or feet first, just as you choose."

"Kerry me out, then. I'm orful weak."

The men hardly waited for Bedrock's answer. One at either arm, they made their spring, and had him in their grip before the nearest spectators guessed what was coming.

Then they gave a wrench commensurate with the size of the body they expected to move.

Unfortunately for them, Primrose was just a shade ahead of the tug. They had all the steam at their command applied, and yet were pulling against the empty air. They broke their own hold, and staggered apart, while Bedrock shot forward, throwing out his arms wildly as he came.

It seemed like a chance to the few who were watching; but it was not chance at all. His right arm shot out under the left one of Jack Harper, while his left hand caught the right one of the proprietor of the Flume.

"All ban's round, and balance ter yer pard-ners!" Bedrock shouted, and without pause he

whirled his captive around as he pranced toward the door with a regular polka step.

"Heel and toe, away we go!
Oh, what delight it is to know
The pleasures of the polka!"

So sung Uncle Bedrock as he dragged Harper this way and that, managing to elude more than one hand outstretched to grasp them, and reaching the door so quickly that the men against whom he caromed in his passage had little time to guess what had happened.

At the door there was the briefest of pauses.

"So-long, gents! Sandy Soakers'll see yer later!" the tramp laughed, as he deftly swung his captive from the floor and tossed him on a convenient table.

Then he slipped out of the door, dove into the alleyway, caught up his bundle, which still lay there, and had vanished utterly by the time the two bouncers, followed by pretty much all of the spectators, swarmed out on the sidewalk.

"Blamed rough play," said Harper, quietly, to the few who were there to hear him as he picked himself off of the table.

"He's a better man than he looks, and I am not sure but what it served me right."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAN WITH A MAP.

WITHOUT attempting to describe all his aches and pains, it is enough to say that after the excitement consequent upon the coming of his daughter had subsided, Mr. Lyons did not rest well during the rest of the night.

He tossed and turned as well as his injuries would let him, and Pony Taylor did not sleep as soundly as he would have liked to, in spite of the fact that Miss Edna took the duty of nursing largely off his hands.

The young lady had told her story briefly, and then begged to say nothing more about it until morning. Perhaps she was wise to refuse to think about it more than she could help, but the injured man, though seeming to acquiesce in her decision, troubled himself all the more.

The night came to an end, however, and the dawning morning showed two faces haggard and wan, and a third bearing no traces of anything but mild interest, as its owner looked around him somewhat curiously.

The cabin rather improved under a daylight view.

It was a tumble-down sort of an affair, and its furnishing meager enough, but there was a neatness about the interior which showed that Miss Edna was not neglectful of household duties, even under the most discouraging circumstances.

"Looks like a shame to attempt to wring in here, and I ought to be moving," was his thought.

"Yet it would not be a half bad place to have headquarters until I can get on my feet. If I had a little capital to go on, I might see if there was an opening, but, I swear! I don't like to come in as a pauper."

With something of a sigh he decided he would have to trust himself to the tender mercies of the burg, but before going he looked over Mr. Lyons.

Taylor knew something about broken bones, and was an amateur surgeon of considerable skill. He did not want to make any mistakes with the gentleman who had confided himself to his care. Much as Lyons seemed to dislike on meeting Doctor Rice, Taylor would have insisted calling him in if he had not felt sure the arm was set as well as it could be, and that there was no danger of any permanent disfigurement.

While he was making his examination Edna prepared breakfast. It was too late for him to slip away. She was cheerful, Mr. Lyons was feeling better, and there was no need for him to be the only unsatisfied one at the feast. He made himself agreeable, and ate a breakfast that was satisfactory in both quality and quantity.

"Don't feel hurt if I talk plainly," said Mr. Lyons, a little later.

"You have done me a great service, and one I can never, perhaps, repay; but you must allow me to show you my gratitude. From what you have said I fancy you have lately met with hard luck. Allow me to put myself at your disposal until you can light again on your feet. Until I have somewhat recovered I do not care to be at all times here alone with my daughter, and if you can stand the accommodations for a few nights, I would prefer to have you with me. Even if you came in late you would be here, no doubt, at the hour I would need you most."

"Thanks. That is a fair offer, and I am not too proud to accept it. I am down on my luck, but it will only be temporary. I have a spare revolver on which I can no doubt get a small advance, and with a few dollars in my pocket there will be an opening for a driving man, in some direction."

"And outside of sport—at which I have an idea you sometimes take a hand—in what direction would you like to have it come?"

"Oh, I'm not particular. Anything is game that comes in the ring. I can manage a mine, or I can prospect on a grub-stake. I can run a hotel, or boss a wagon train; clerk in a bank or

round up a herd of cattle. Anything in a mining-camp from alcalde to hotel bouncer would be in my line, for I have tried pretty much of them all."

"And equally good at all, no doubt. Perhaps—if you are really open to an engagement—there might be profit to both of us if I got you to work for a time with me."

"Perhaps," answered the sport, looking keenly at the speaker.

It had occurred to him already that Mr. Lyons must have some strong inducements to make up his mind to such a residence, in such a town.

"You may think the chances for profit are not as large as you would like them! In regard to that I would scarcely be able to convince you by any figures I have to show; and yet, in the words of the immortal colonel, there may be 'millions in it.'"

"Um! Something in the line of a lost bonanza, I presume?"

"You have hit it exactly. It is from something of the kind you would have to draw your large profits, if there were any. But there is something else in which you could help me, for which I could pay you fair wages as you went along. We did not come to Mineral Bar exactly paupers, and I have spent but little, waiting until I could find a clew before making any wild expenditures."

"No doubt, then, there is a missing man, and you think there are traces of him here?"

"Correct again, though how you are wizard enough to guess so exactly is more than strange."

"Not a bit of it. The lost bonanzas are scattered around by the thousand, and missing men seem to foot up well into the millions. It is always one or the other, with the bonanza for choice, when a gentleman like yourself becomes mysterious."

"Then, you think I have been deceived, and that nothing of the kind exists?"

"Oh, no. I would not say that. Plenty of them there are; but the trouble is to find them. I never set myself down on the trail of one, so that I don't know what I might be able to do, but I think I would rather hunt the missing man if I had any proof at all he was in the land of the living."

"Well, the man who is missing is dead, beyond a doubt; and the search is rather for the one who killed him. There is not much to go on, and yet I have believed I had some faint traces. The occurrences of the past night serve to convince me I have not been altogether wrong."

"In other words, you believe you know who killed Paul Prindle?"

"Right again," said Mr. Lyons, more surprised than he had been; and a good deal puzzled.

"Surely you know nothing of the man?"

"Nothing save what I caught from your mutterings last night, when you were resting uneasily. I know the direction of your suspicions, and that is all. If I could see your man I would be willing to give a guess whether he had a man on his bed-post of nights."

"Then, you shall see him. Indeed, if you stay any great time in Mineral Bar you could hardly help but see him. If he is the man who killed poor Paul, then I am almost sure he has the other half to the key which will point out the spot to search for the hidden wealth."

"And who was Paul Prindle, if the question is not an impertinent one?"

"Not at all. He was the uncle of Edna—the brother of her mother. He came out here ten years ago, or more, after a failure in the East. From that time on we heard nothing of him until he was supposed to be dead."

"No letters, or anything of that sort, meantime?"

"Not a line."

"We were hardly surprised at that, however. Paul Prindle was not the man to send news unless it was good news. 'Unless I can strike it rich you won't hear from me till I am dead and gone.' That was what he said when he left, and he kept his word only too well. He must have been dead for years when the letter came which said he believed he had found even more than he had hoped for."

"You had a letter from him, then?"

"Yes, a letter that by some strange fate had been wandering around for years—or, perhaps, lying hidden in some old mail-sack. We had made inquiries meantime, plenty of them, but the West seemed to have swallowed him up."

"And this told you where to find him?"

"Not exactly; but it gave a point of departure, which was what is now known as Spur City, if I am not mistaken. It gave the direction and the distance he had to travel from that point to reach the neighborhood of his bonanza, and then the half of a map which would locate the spot. The other half he promised to send in his next letter."

"And that next letter was never sent?"

"Never, so far as we know; yet I have a strong belief it was written, and that he was killed to obtain possession of it."

"Well, I should say it would hardly be worth while to spend much time and money searching

for it now. If there was any claim in this region it has without a doubt been retaken by this time, and worked over. The placers here are almost played out, and the quartz ground is pretty well covered."

"So I feared; but, if I have not misunderstood the directions I have, Paul Prindle's find was in a region where there has been but little prospecting, and less development. Unless I am away off I have found the district; but I am at a loss where in it to search. It might be anywhere within an area twenty miles square."

"If there is anything worth the finding, and you can get it down that fine, the quest is not hopeless. I suppose you hardly have the map, such as it is, with you?"

"No. I came prepared for the campaign, and with my eyes open. I know every line and shade in it as well as though it was before me, and can reproduce it on the same scale to the fraction of an inch, if need be to match the missing half."

"And you have been over the ground?"

"Of that I will not be positive; but it seems to me I have recognized some familiar spots."

"And, one question more. How does it come you suspect the doctor of having had anything to do with the killing of your brother-in-law?"

"Principally because he has had an eye on me from the time I came into this camp. If he is the man I think he is, then there would be nothing strange in his having recognized my name, and guessed at what was my mission. But whether he wants to remove me for his own safety, or desires to hold an advantage in order that he may get the rest of that chart, is more than I can determine. Time will show. Of course, you are a stranger in this section of the country?"

Taylor smiled all through these last statements.

It had struck him that perhaps the doctor was as much interested in Miss Edna as he was in the chart. So far, he was just on the outskirts of the story. There was plenty more to be described, but he thought he saw signs that the conversation was taxing his host more than was safe and he attempted to draw out of it.

"That is enough for the present, my friend. Let me think it over for a while, and then I can ask you questions about the rest. I might tell you, though, that I scouted through this region, some years ago, and know about as much concerning the lay of the land as the average man. That will come in later, though."

"Ah, you tell me so! Look, then. I will trust you as I would have trusted no one else on such short acquaintance. Edna, give me pencil and paper. We will see if you recognize the map I will draw you."

"But your arm, papa! Are you not afraid you may damage it?"

Edna was either more cautious, or more careful.

"Never mind the arm. I can use the other, and it can do me no hurt. I cannot rest until I see whether fate has not brought the right man to our assistance."

Pony Taylor said nothing, but watched the girl hand to her father the materials asked for, and then the skillful fingers swiftly tracing the rude chart.

"There! That is the map as I received it. See! It is cut diagonally in two. This land in the corner it seems to me I have found; but of this stream, a little further on, there is no trace. Look well at the map, for I must destroy it at once. Then you can tell me if it corresponds with any ground you know of."

Taylor followed the direction of Mr. Lyons's finger, and at the same time seemed to be trying to recall something he remembered but dimly.

"It looks natural," he muttered.

"I fancy I know the spot you are speaking of, and if this is the same, then that stream you failed to find is the Sunken River. No man knows what its course really is, so far as I have heard, but it is more likely to be that than anything else. Perhaps Paul Prindle's bonanza is to be found in its ancient bed. Do you know, I think if there is anything in it at all, the division of the chart was only a blind, and that all the points are in the fraction you hold? If I was as young as I once was I would be quite enthusiastic."

CHAPTER XIV.

FRIENDS MEET.

"THEN you begin to believe there really may be something in it after all?"

Lyons asked the question anxiously; and his very earnestness convinced Taylor that the man was not thoroughly infatuated about the hidden bonanza.

"Oh, come now!" laughed the sport.

"I never believe much in what I don't see; and I have not had time enough to think about this. I don't want you to go off on a wild-goose chase just because I give you a word of encouragement."

"No danger of that," answered Lyons, a little sadly.

"It will be a week or more before I will be able to go anywhere, outside of this house; but you have said enough to show I made no mis-

take in making you my confidant. I have guardedly questioned a hundred in regard to that country, and you are the first who has ever hinted at the Sunken River."

"Probably they could have had no idea you were asking for more than was on the top of the ground. I would never have thought of it but for the map. Now, then, I must suggest that you have had enough of this for the morning. If Miss Edna thinks she can take care of you for a while I will go out and view the town. I am not as feverishly anxious as I was about it last night, when I did not know what roof would receive me, or which way I would turn; but it is as well to get an idea of the city. Even if we go on the hunt for the sunken stream it will be some little time before we can start; and meanwhile something may be done here."

The sport had not really so much interest in the town, and would as soon have passed the day lounging in the shadow of the cabin, smoking his pipe; but he recognized that to stay there longer would keep up the excitement of Mr. Lyons, and he decided to go before it had done him further harm.

"If he gets to talking about the Paul Prindle matter yet, he may be raving before he is ready to quit. It is time I slipped away, and left him to the soothing influences of his daughter."

So thought the sport, and very firmly he took himself away.

Mineral Bar was a thriving little place, but by daylight there did not seem to be so much of it. It did not take him long to explore the business part of the town, and take a long-range view of its environs.

In spite of the fact that there was no immediate cause to worry over what he was to eat and where he was to rest, he felt a good deal like a cat in a strange garret.

"It is all very well to make headquarters with Lyons, but there is no telling how long that is going to last; and for a man to be without money is—well, tempting Providence. I must make a raise, if it is only a few dollars. And I won't ask Lyons for a friendly loan, either."

He had said that he had a spare revolver.

That seemed the most likely thing on which to get an advance, but he had some articles of more value. He looked around for a place where he might be able to make a deal; and finally stumbled into the one establishment in town where the diamond studs he carried in his vest pocket were available.

"Mordecai Levy," read the name above the door, and the sport was pretty certain he could pledge his diamonds there, if the proprietor once caught their sparkle with his eyes.

The gentleman behind the counter was a Hebrew; of that, a glance made him sure. He nodded, and began business without delay.

"I want a loan on good and sufficient collateral; and I don't want too big a one, either. Will you let me have twenty-five on these?"

The individual addressed was Mordecai himself.

"Dot vosh so modest I dinks I vill offer you fiddy eef the berschent vos large enough."

"I understand. If I am willing to stand the swindle in the matter of interest. About what is the size of the per cent. you expect?"

"Shoost a leedle dhen berschent. Dot vos all."

"That looks a little too moderate. If I took them for a year, your dollars would not grow as fast as they ought to in legitimate business. Ten per cent. a year is legal, but it is hardly enough."

"A year! Mine craycious, vot you dakes me for! A day! Dhen berschent a day is vot shentlemans vot bledges di'munts vosh in der habits of baying; but as I knows you, Mishder Daylor, I makes it for you somedings less."

"You know me, do you? That seems strange, for it is a long time since I had any dealings with any of your tribe, and certainly never with you."

"Dot vosh so, but I remembers you ven you vos in der Elefant Lode, and they said you vos a booty schquare man do deals vith. Dake der fiddy and pay me eent'rest ven you gits der di'munts."

"Thanks for your good opinion; but it don't seem to make business much easier to transact. I might as well give you the stones and be done with it. They are worth a hundred and fifty right here; and a good deal more further East."

"Pizzness ish pizzness, mine friendt, undt a shport of dot monish can make it a goot many dimes ofer in den days."

"Yes, but at present I'm not on the sport. It's only a little spending money I am looking for, until the wages begin to come in. I don't calculate to break any bank with it, or worry the chiefs at short cards. I tell you, Mordecai, it's a virtuous, steady sort of life I am after living now, and I can afford the deal."

Levy looked at the diamonds, and then at Taylor. His little black eyes twinkled avariciously, and he turned away with a sigh.

Then, he suddenly faced the sport again.

"Mine friendt, if dot vos drue I loans you dot dwendy-vive midout der gollaterals, undt you make id right ven it suits you do bay me."

He shoved the money over as he spoke, and

then retreated hastily, as though he was afraid to trust himself longer in the neighborhood of a man with such magnetic influence. He said a word to a clerk, who came over to where Taylor was standing, and then continued his flight through a door which led to a room at the rear of his store.

"Well, I'll be blessed!" gasped Taylor, thoroughly surprised, yet not altogether unwilling to take advantage of the offer.

"There must be something behind it all, but I don't see how it can hurt me. The only thing is, I'm sort of bound over not to set up for a chief. If I do I suppose there is an unwritten bond to pay him my ten per cent. a day. That must be what he is after; and I guess he is going to be disappointed."

He told the clerk he was in need of nothing for the present, and left the store. As he came out he found himself face to face with a man whom he recognized; and who seemed to recognize him.

Taylor looked a little the worse for wear, but he was a city dude compared with this man, who was out at the elbows and down at the heels after a most shocking fashion. Nevertheless the sport stopped when he was accosted, and listened without any visible repugnance.

"Thar's ther hand ov Sandy Soakers," the ragged individual exclaimed, thrusting out one paw, though not getting it quite within reaching distance.

"Thar may be dirt on it, an' ef so he shakes it hisself, an' says, I'm glad ter see yer; pard, an' yer does me proud."

He covered the right paw with the left, and shook it heartily. It was an old trick of his, and one who had ever met him would probably recognize him by that if by nothing else.

"Thanks for the trouble saved," answered Taylor, smiling at the tramp. "Still on the old trail? There is no disputing tastes, and I suppose that, as usual, you have found something interesting to a philosopher. What are you doing at Mineral Bar?"

"Oh, bummin' round ez usu'l. Can't sw'ar ez yit, but think I'll strike it 'bout ez rich ez hereterefore. So fur, am grub an' onlimited bitters ahead, an' ther cream ov ther game ter hear frum. An' yerself? Are ther Taylors spreadin' ther festive lay-out fur ther benefit ov ther weary peelgrims, er hev yer kim to ther front in a boomin' bonanza? Wherever yer goes yer prospers, but ef it's undesired consider ez Sandy are askin' no ques'shuns."

"Oh, I have been in hard luck, myself, and without your reserve to fall back on. If it had not been for a lucky chance I would have been hustling as hard as you ever did in search of my daily bread. I am not sure, yet, how things are going to work, but if they run as I expect, it may be I will have use for a man of about your size. If so, are you open to an engagement?"

"Pends ontirely on ther cirkinstances ov ther case. Ef it's ter right wrong, er defeat ther ends ov villainy, yer kin count on Bedrock. Ther longer he travels ther more he sees ov them things, an' ther quicker he gits a paw inter ther mix. But ef it's jest a ordinary job, ov good wages an' nothin' much ter do, count him 'way out. I've bin ole bizzness in me younger days, an' now I'm enjoyin' rest an' rekreashun in me old age, ter say nothin' ov ther fact thet I hev a leetle game ov me own ez 'pears ter be operin' up fine."

"Might know it was no use to talk sense to you, though I suppose if you happen to be needed you will be on the carpet all the same. It is your way. Is there any temporary stringency in the money market? It seems to me you look worse than usual."

"None, me noble lord; an' yit, if ther sakrefize are not too overwhelmin' it mout be ez well ef you could loan me a quarter—jest fur ther benefit ov ary anx'shus 'bserver. It mout be better fur us two ter seem ter be strangers tell ther play are over, an' ther folks gone home—"

"Good thing you didn't ask me to make it a half or I might have had to ask you to change a bill. There's the coin that represented my fortune when I struck the bar. And, by the way, do you know anything about Father Mordecai, who runs this ranch? He seems to have me down fine, but blessed if I remember anything about him."

"Don't know him frum a Afrikan guerriller. Thanks ter yer highness fur ther accommerdashun. Kin slip it inter yer han' ag'in ther fust time we meet in ther dark. Ta-tal! An' look out fur 'em at ther Flume, ef yer wanders that way. Ther men thar are onregenerately bad."

The walking philosopher awung himself away, and slouched down the street. The conversation had certainly been overheard by no one; and if any one was viewing the interview from afar, the most that could be seen was that the hummer had struck the sport for a small stake, and had gone on his way rejoicing.

"I saw'ar!"

Bedrock had not proceeded a dozen yards when he muttered the exclamation. If he had been any other man he would have at least turned and given a glance toward the spot where he had just left Taylor.

"An' me a-furgittin' ter say arnything to him 'bout w'ot they war sayin' lass' night, ov Ready Rank bein' no furdur off than ther Gulch. Ef I warn't for wonst surprized clean off'n me basel An' ef Rank war a-lookin' over ther hotel registers, w'ot's ther matter with it bein' Pony he war after? Not ez it mout 'a' bin ther mos' comfortable thing a-goin' fur ther rus'-ler ef he'd 'a' found him; but a hint wouldn't hurt a blind hoss, ef thar war no time ter give him a wink."

Fortunately, perhaps, Primrose was himself; and so made no attempt to look for the sport.

If he was already anxious that their previous acquaintance should not be known he showed his wisdom.

As he swaggered along he heard a voice at his shoulder.

"Who was your friend? It looked as though he must have been one, since he was willing to make you a friendly loan."

The speaker was Billy Barton, and Bedrock thought he had sharp eyes to see the financial transaction at the distance he must have been.

"Yer can't prove it by me. I addressed him ez John Swinson, ov Turkey Bend. He didn't seem ter recomember ther name, so I struck him fur a limited amount, an' that answered jest ez well. Looks sport frum ther ground up, an' ef I'd 'a' thought I might hev steered him your way."

"Thanks! You let steering alone till you are told to do it. And now, what in thunder did you go back to the Flume for, last night? If you are not a dead man before the day is over it will be because Jack Harper is afraid the boys will never get done joking him about his corpse. You are rather a tough-looking customer to go on the record of Gentleman Jack."

Bedrock stuck his thumbs into the arm-holes of his ragged vest, and swelled out his chest.

"That frien' ov yours seemed ter think I war a middlin' no-account sorter a fraud, ez couldn't take keer ov meself w'en I got in good company, an' I jest tho't I'd show him w'ot sorter a man I be."

"Well, we don't want any more of it, and I am not sure you have not already destroyed your usefulness. It may be, however, there will be something for you to do to-night. Be at Mike's about sundown, and stay there for an hour if you don't hear from us sooner. After that, go your own gait for the night. That will do for the present. I'll move off before you strike me for a loan."

CHAPTER XV.

JACK HARPER'S OFFICE OPENS FOR BUSINESS. PONY TAYLOR had met Uncle Bedrock before, and knew something of the man and his ways. This meeting with him had its significance.

"The old fellow is not here without a purpose of some kind. What that can be there is no use to guess, for if he told you you couldn't understand him. The only question is, whether he and I will again find ourselves in the same game. There might be worse persons for a partner if he did not have such a confounded tendency to play a lone hand. What could he have meant by that hint about the Flume? He could hardly have taken a better plan to get me in that direction, for Ragged Rufe, as they used to call him, seldom speaks without meaning something."

Taylor had passed the Flume in the course of his explorations, but by daylight everything there was quiet and orderly. It was hardly worth while to visit it now. And as he had engaged himself to Mr. Lyons it would never do to enter it after dark.

Pony knew that it was not in his nature to stand back when sport was going on around him, and so had decided to keep out of the way of temptation—if he could.

In due course of time he got back to the cabin on the edge of the town, and found his dinner waiting for him. Mr. Lyons seemed to be doing well, and Miss Edna gave no sign that she feared another attack.

Yet Lyons acted as though he thought some one might be spying on them, and spoke in low tones. He had questions to ask in regard to the land in the vicinity of the Sunken River, and was ready to unfold the plans he was already framing for the coming campaign.

"If things are as I suspect, I will try for the bonanza first. That will bring the man who killed Paul Prindle in my wake. Perhaps we would be safer for the present if he knew of our plans for the future, though I would not have him know too much, either."

Once started on this tack, and Mr. Lyons had a good deal to say.

As he was getting along so well, Taylor did not attempt to stop him, and so the afternoon went along quite rapidly; but when night came, it was quite a different thing. If he had been a small boy, and there had been a circus band in the distance, he could not have stirred more uneasily in his chair.

"You are tired of this, Mr. Taylor," said Edna with a smile.

"You are as curious as a woman, and would like to see how the town looks by lamplight. Why not go? With our revolvers, and the door locked, we are certainly safe, and there is no need for you to be a prisoner."

"I suppose you are right. I didn't know it."

but I must want to go—bad. If I can be off duty for a couple of hours, I will improve the opportunity. When I return you can have the rest of the night to yourself, as I will be on hand for any looking after that your father may need."

Out of the house, and Pony turned toward the Plume as naturally as though he had lived there. He felt sure it was the most important saloon in the place, even if it had a rougher name than some of the others. When he reached the doors everything was "wide open," and he entered without attracting any apparent attention.

As he edged his way through the crowd, he became aware that a pair of dark eyes were surveying him with a scowl, and looking their owner over, he saw that the man had his nose well patched up with court-plaster.

"Bless my soul!" he thought.

"I may be wrong, but though you have different clothes on, I'm open to a fair bet that there is a specimen of my handiwork. If I have struck on the headquarters of the gang I met on the mountain, I want to move slow till I can feel sure of my footing. There is not the chance here for fine work there is in the open, and I might have to take in a few innocent victims if there was a racket started in the house."

He made no mistake about the man, though he was visible for only a moment. The man with the court-plaster on his nose was as much surprised as was Taylor, and slid out of sight so quickly, Pony did not know what had become of him.

There was a man, however, who did see.

Jack Harper was on duty, and when he was about, there was little that escaped his eye. He followed the man out, and found him waiting, probably for one of his pards.

"Seen a ghost, have you, Tommy?"

He came up quietly, and spoke in a low, laughing tone.

"Not by a blamed sight; but I wished I had."

"That stranger who just came in, eh?"

"That same. See hyer, if you ask, it's a safe thing ter tell yer w'ot yer wants ter know. He's ther gerloot ez plastered this nose ov mine all over my face. You kin judge how hard I'm a-lovin' ov him."

"Tried to do something in a professional sort of way, and found you had run against a snag? He does look as though he might make it uncomfortable for an outsider that was putting on frills when he didn't want to see them. Has he any stamps?"

"He sed not; but I ain't a-takin' his word fur more'n I see. He may have half a millyun. He looked a heap sight harder, when I seed him, though. Bin a-sprucin' up, an' from his face I sh'ud say he war not sufferin' fur coin. Better try him a jingle afore he gits inter my han's."

"Perhaps I had. But if I do I want you to understand there must be no pickin' of a quarrel with him in my house."

"Pick thunder! Not while he's lookin' my way. I've bin thar. Ef it's very dark ez he goes home, I might be willin' ter watch when he trots by, but I don't want ter say nothin' to him—not ef he kin hear me. An' I don't think I got a pard ez keers ter take it up whar I left off. He's bizzness now, chuck up, an' you better b'lieve me."

"He must be, if he has scared out Tommy Twofeet. If I knew more of what happened, I could understand better, but perhaps I had better not ask questions. So you are going to swallow it down, and let it go?"

"Good sense and more profit about that. I thought he was rather a touch above your line. I wanted to get at what was behind that look you gave him—and, by the way, I shouldn't wonder if he saw it. He has eyes in the back of his head."

"I ain't sure but there's more profit outen him dead 'n livin', an' if you'll fix it so that thar won't be no danger ov a rope-party, I'll take ther blame ef you'll do ther killin'. Mou't be big money in it ef I on'y dared ter touch him."

"You think so? If I put him on the trap will you turn the button?"

Harper knew, of course, who he was talking to; and Twofeet understood the allusion to the button, even if he had never seen the trap worked. He looked up with a glint of fire in his eyes that was not lost even in the semi-darkness.

"Dog-gone him, yes! But tell yer wants me I don't want ter be whar them gimblets ov his kin drop on me, er it seems ter me he'll bore ther truth ov w'ot's comin' right outen me."

"Don't be afraid of that. If I was sure he had the wealth about his clothes that I suspect, I would know better whether it would be worth while to try him a whirl. I'll find out, and let you know whether to be around."

"W'ot's he got in for him?" thought Tommy, as the gambler turned away.

"Ther jol's all right; but it ain't fur ther duckats in his pockets. Jack could get them fast enough, 'thout takin' me in ez a side pard."

Leaving Tommy to study over the mystery, the gambler sauntered back into the saloon, and though it would have been hard for any one to

have told that he was looking in the direction of the sport, he at once satisfied himself that Taylor had not left the saloon during his absence.

Pony was still in sight, lounging around without any apparent object, and after a little Harper came sliding his way, and greeted him with a nod.

"Stranger here, I believe? Make yourself at home, and if you don't see what you want ask for it. That is the principle we run on."

A man of Taylor's experience did not have to look twice to see that Harper was a gambler, and he had already had him identified as the proprietor.

"A bit of a stranger, but it don't generally take me long to get acquainted. And as I don't often want the earth it is not likely I will have much to say. There ought to be enough here to satisfy the ordinary man."

"Just so you feel at home; just so you feel at home."

Harper seldom had to go out of his way to hunt up a game. He left that part of the business to the men who had it in charge; and his cappers, though not generally known as such, did their work well. If there was a game in town that could be reached it came to Harper, in case he wanted it, without any effort on his part.

It was a little awkward to have to throw himself in the way of this stranger, but he thought he had managed to do it without showing more than an ordinary professional spirit. If Pony Taylor was a chief he would not be slow to answer what might be construed into a challenge.

And Taylor had forgotten his good resolutions, and was thinking where he had met this man in the past; and trying to make up his mind whether it could be worth his while to find out.

To do the latter there was nothing like a seance at the card table, and the temptation was great. Before he fairly knew what he was saying he had answered:

"You hit me close to where I live, in that, pard. Honor bright, I do feel something like a cat in a strange garret. It's not the safest thing in the world to wring myself into one of the games, and yet it seems to me it is where I ought to belong. You couldn't introduce me, could you?"

By a sweeping gesture he included the room at large. If Jack Harper was angling to inveigle him into a game, certainly Pony was willing to meet him half-way.

"That's right," nodded Jack.

"If you want to be a chief there is nothing like starting in at headquarters. There is an empty table over there, and as we go along you might be naming your vanity."

"It takes money to buy land," answered Taylor, gravely.

On second thought it had struck him he was but poorly equipped for a struggle with the proprietor of the house, who was no doubt gilt-edged as a player, and with thousands to back him. He rather wished he had tried to inveigle Mordecai into a bigger loan, and wondered whether it would be worth his while to go out and seek an interview before sitting down at the table. Twenty-five dollars was a beggarly capital to begin with.

"Oh, it is sport we are after, and I do not profess to be a high-roller myself. Fix the limit to suit for the present, and at another time we can raise it if we want. I never like to see a thoroughbred suffer."

"Then it's not to be for blood and hair. All right. I'll do my best to make things comfortable, and I have no doubt we can have an elegant time."

Harper looked at his watch.

"I have an hour I can give you; and something tells me it will not be an hour lost. Better come into my office, after all. I can introduce you to a friend or two, and when they are there we generally open a bottle of wine. I don't know how you take it, but I think you are in luck."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TURN OF THE BUTTON.

THE office was a room, in one corner of the building, which Jack had fitted up as his own den, and to which few were admitted without a formal invitation.

It was reached by several doors, and in this case Harper preferred to take his new acquaintance thither by one which opened from the rear side of the house. There was some risk of their being seen entering together, but not so certainly as if they had passed directly from the main room of the saloon.

For the moment they were on the street, however, they saw no one near, and Jack could only guess that Tommy Twofeet was watching from a distance.

"They are not much for style, but a heap for comfort," said Jack, sweeping his hand around to all points of the compass, and then motioning to a chair.

"None of the boys are about, but some of them will be on hand before we have gone very far with the game. They seem to scent it from far off, and drop in to see the fun, and maybe

take a hand in. There are cigars over there. Help yourself."

There was nothing surprising in all this, yet Taylor was not for an instant deceived.

There was a better reason than the desire for a companion for an hour or so.

Nevertheless, he accepted the attentions as he had done under somewhat similar circumstances in the past. He lit a cigar, and threw himself down in the easy-chair that had been pointed out to him, wondering whether it was not rather to talk than to gamble this man had brought him there.

"If you say fun, we will make the ante a dollar, and the limit five. If you prefer it wide open it will suit me just as well."

As he spoke, Harper tossed down a fresh pack of cards, lighted his own cigar, and slid into a chair at the side of the table.

"I vote for the limit. Perhaps I will last longer. Anyway, I will hardly make more than a mouthful."

Jack smiled, and cut the cards which Taylor had been shuffling. Then, the game went on.

It was not in the nature of two such men to begin a game without becoming interested in it. By the time a few hands were played, each of them knew the other was an adept, and that the luck, what there was of it, was with Pony Taylor.

Playing for a trifling limit made the game very lively, and Harper seemed more reckless than he had ever been before with a stranger, such as Pony was. A dozen hands were played in as many minutes, and a good many times more than half the stakes went to the stranger sport.

"You are in a streak to-night," said Harper, as his antagonist raked off a number of pots in succession.

"What is the use of making two bites of a cherry? Either you go burst, or I take water. Let's raise the limit."

"It suits me well enough as it is, but it's your turn to have a say-so. I don't care about seeing the blessed institution raised clear out of sight, though. How would a hundred suit you?"

"Anything at all. And as the boys are slow about coming, suppose we try that wine before we go any further."

He pressed a button as he spoke, and though the bell was too far away for him to hear it tinkle Pony knew he had rung it, all the same.

In a few seconds a man in slippers came gliding into the room, carrying a tray which he placed upon the table at Harper's elbow, and then silently withdrew. If he had been in a metropolitan saloon he could not have shown better training.

"The most of my customers prefer the regular hardware; but I think I am good enough judge of faces to know when I have hold of a fellow mortal who can appreciate the real good things of life. Taste it and be convinced."

He filled a glass for himself, and then pushed the bottle and a glass toward Taylor.

It did not seem possible that as yet the wine had been doctored, though Pony began to suspect that if luck continued to stay with him something of the kind would be tried in the end. He could see the bottom of his glass, as clear as crystal; and as Jack had helped himself from the bottle in his presence there should be no danger in drinking with him. Without hesitation Taylor followed suit.

The wine was all that had been claimed for it, and on the instant seemed to act generously on the drinkers.

A genial glow spread through the system of the sport, while the gambler leaned forward confidentially.

"It may seem a little odd for me to pick up a stranger, and bring him into my sanctum, but the fact is, I get awfully lonesome sometimes. There is money in Mineral Bar, and I am getting my share of it; but money is not the only thing in the world. If it wasn't for Doc Rice, and one or two others—and the doctor is the only one of the bunch really worth caring for—I think I would jump the game and go where there was something else besides hard gambling and an occasional drink. Of course, I have to keep my head clear or business would suffer, so I touch the bowl lightly."

"I understand you exactly," answered Taylor; and he thought he did.

"When a man makes a business of the game it sometimes gets tiresome, and if there is nothing to relieve the strain it gets awful. What sort is Rice? Another good man thrown away in the great West?"

"Yes. If he was where he had the chance he would be one of the great lights of his profession. I wouldn't like to see him go, but that is what I have told him more than once. He is working himself in pieces here, riding over the mountains, and tramping up the gulches, to look after a lot of sick brutes that couldn't pay him if they would, and if they could would forget all about him as soon as they didn't need him any longer."

"He has the field all to himself, here, has he?"

"He is the only man worth shucks in an accident; but there are a couple youngsters who can sling pills, and measure out powders. I'm not sure but what they are making a better

thing of it than Rice—but he don't seem to care."

"Does something at the pasteboards, now and then, I suppose?"

"Blast him! that's the one thing he won't do. We play a game now and then, for the fun of the thing, and put a limit on so low that it's bound not to hurt. I don't want his money; and he don't believe he can get mine. All the same, he can play a stiff hand when he wants to. I don't know a man in the camp who could get away with him in a square game."

"He's an odd one, then. Perhaps he is just laying back for something worth the while."

"No. I have told him he was a fool to be wasting his life here; but he has some stuck-up notions about the 'good of humanity.' I offered to take him in on the ground floor, and make his everlasting fortune, but he only laughed. He says that is not his style. He'll have to keep on doing good to the widows and cripples to the end of the chapter."

"Might be doing worse, after all. Guess he is happier than either of us," said Taylor with a sigh that sounded like the genuine article.

"Perhaps he is; but all the same, it looks like a dog-gone shame. But fill up your glass again, and then we'll go on with the cards. We can talk after awhile. When I get started on the doctor I don't know when to stop. He's so clean white, and he's just been my salvation."

Pony Taylor was more than interested in this conversation, even though he could not be sure of the truth of what was being said.

As yet he had seen nothing of Doctor Rice, and had heard nothing outside of what Mr. Lyons had said. Even if Harper was talking for a purpose it might be he could be used to bring them together, and so he listened eagerly, though not showing his interest, and tried to keep the conversation going in this channel, though all the time thinking the gambler must have some reason for these confidences.

"It must be that he knows I have taken up my headquarters at the house of Mr. Lyons, and he either wants to do his friend a service by giving him a good character, or else he is preparing the way for pumping me about the intentions of the man with whom I am staying. Either way, it is pretty certain, Lyons is not so far wrong when he thinks Doctor Rice is something of a villain. I may as well keep him talking if I can, but I must be careful of what I say."

Convinced in his own mind of the object of the gambler—and some object, which did not appear on the surface, he knew he must have—Pony Taylor was thrown off his guard in a way he never would have been had the game gone straight on without any interruption.

The wine was good. He had already tested that, and had no objection to more of the same sort.

Without a thought he once more filled his glass, and slowly drained it as he listened to Jack Harper still further descanting on the virtues of the whitest man in Mineral Bar.

Then Harper gathered up the cards, looked at his watch to see how time had gone, and began to deal, still talking.

The deal was certainly a square one, and as Taylor looked over his hand he regretted that he was so poorly equipped for a struggle. In spite of his winnings he had but little over the one hundred dollars at which they had fixed the limit, so that it was no use to suggest that the game go on without a flyer.

Yet he was certain that he saw by the gambler's eyes, which were not as thoroughly under control as usual, that he had a hand on which he would have risked a good many hundreds. To lose such an opportunity was really distressing.

Jack followed his small opening with a bet a trifle larger, and from that time the stakes rose by slow degrees, the two players operating with all the finesse and firmness they would have shown if each man had thousands at his elbow.

By the time two or three little bets had been made, Taylor was dimly conscious that he was not altogether himself.

One who knew him would have known better than he did that he was changing, both in looks and nature, and might have been puzzled to account for it. By the time each man had about seventy-five dollars on the table, Pony felt as though he owned the earth.

"It is sad," he laughed, as he pushed over some twenty dollars toward the stakes already up.

"That fills the limit, and is as good as a call, though I would hardly have cared to stop there if things had been otherwise. Do you see me?"

"Bother the limit!" laughed the gambler.

"On this one hand it won't do to be too strict. There is your twenty to look at; and here are a thousand better to talk to. Call, straddle, or throw to the middle."

Taylor somehow was treading on air, though he did not know how he did it. The aces in his hand looked like four brilliants, and if he had not been harder-headed than the average, the few coin left at his elbow would have been magnified to a million.

As it was, he had never felt so reckless in his life, though his tongue was not altogether away from him.

"Sorry, pard, that you lay over me in ammunition, for when one is in the vein, it is bad form to balk at a little fence. The limit don't trouble me as much as it ought to, though I guess I'll have to stick out for it. If you had said five hundred, now, I might have tried to meet you."

"All right. I have sized your pile. Five hundred goes. There you have it; is it good?"

Harper spoke rapidly, and acted as swiftly as he spoke. With one hand he drew down five hundred of the stakes, and with the other threw his five cards face upwards on the table.

Taylor gave a glance, and then began: "Four kings, eh? Not good. Here—"

He was flirting his hand open, but as he spoke his arms dropped heavily upon the table, and he stared straight forward with a strange, wooden sort of gaze.

Just then, Harper touched the bell once more.

If Pony had seen the motion, he would not have divined that a change in the connections had been made since the ordering of the wine, or that a bell tinkled low in an entirely different part of the building.

And the answer did not come in the shape of a slippered waiter, but, instead, the floor opened under Taylor's seat, and he and his chair dropped out of sight.

CHAPTER XVII.

BEDROCK'S INITIATION BEGINS.

WHEN Uncle Bedrock parted from Billy Barton he was not certain whether he had done a wise thing in turning himself over for the disposal of the unseen man who appeared to intend to take possession of his destiny.

"Billy Barton may be a good leetle man, an' a despr'it fighter, but I don't b'lieve he ever jined ther church. An', ef I onderstan' a hint, ther boss are a wuss man than he be. I don't mind investergatin' sich men, but blamed ef I like ter let 'em order me 'round. Billy seems ter hev 'covered fur ernough ter walk with a stick, but maybe he'll not be able ter be 'round ter-night, an' then I'll hev ter go it alone among strangers. Are ther fun wu'th ther pleasure?"

It was not often Bedrock took a serious view of the dangers in evil associates; but then he had generally claimed the say-so. He had trusted to the inspiration of the moment when Barton spoke to him, and now he was not altogether satisfied with the seeming result.

"Ef I on'y knowed w'ot war ther object I wouldn't kick so strong, but ef it should turn out ter be nothin' but bloody murder, an' a few dollars fur ther doin' ov it, w'ot a ass I'd think I'd made ov meself. An' yit, 'pears ter me thar must be suthin' in it wu'th ther onderstandin'. I guess I'll wait on 'em a trifle longer, an' see how it pans out."

The walking philosopher did hate to give up a game till it was played through to the end, and so kept himself out of the range of trouble during the day, and was about Finnighy's at the hour of sunset, where he waited patiently for what might turn up.

At Mike's the society was not of so high a grade that he was out of place. Men spoke to him, and he spoke to other men, but the right one was slow in coming. He had about given him up when he heard a whisper:

"If you're waiting for somebody you better follow me. I think I saw the man asking where to find a fellow of your bigness."

The dialect was not the same, and it was hard to be certain of the sound of that voice, but it seemed to him it was from the lips of the man who had led him away after his interview with Billy Barton's friend.

He made no motion to show he heard the advice, yet, in another moment he very naturally swung himself out of the door, and slouched slowly down the street.

Before he had gone a dozen yards he heard a step in his rear.

"It's mighty early, pard, to try to run you in to headquarters, but I think it can be done without any one dropping to the game. If you are as good a man as you have been trying to let on, and are dead set on a job, I think the boss has something for you to-night. Something that a stranger can do better than the boys that are known around town."

"I'm follerin'," replied Primrose, without ever turning his head.

"See that you do, then. If you playslippy, or try to, it will be the last of you."

Then his guide went on in advance, without paying any further attention to him, and finally entered a little building, near to the more pretentious one of the Flume.

There was a low-burning lamp in the room, and Bedrock closed the door before looking around.

Then he broke into a laugh.

"Dog-gone my tail feather!" he thought to himself.

"Ef I ain't in a doctor's shop I want ter know. An' that guide ov mine are outer sight an' hearin'. Wonder ef it's all a sell, er if I'm ter murder ther sawbones w'hen he comes in. I ain't even got a hint ov w'ot's 'pected, an' ef I thought 'at sich a game could be played on Bedrock I'd say it war a trap. Le'ss see. Mebbe

I kin find whar he went to, an' ef I do, you bet I foller."

There was a door on the opposite side of the room, and he advanced to that, though he was almost certain his guide had not had time to pass through and close it.

When he opened the door he found a room still smaller than the first, and in one corner an open trap door.

"Looks wu'ss an' wu'ss; but I'll foller me nose ef it p'int ter Halifax."

He understood that the situation would be delicate, if he was found there by an innocent proprietor, but he was in for the adventure. He had the lamp in his hand, and when he had descended a narrow flight of steps he turned the blaze up higher, and looked around him. As he did so the trap-door at the head of the stairs shut softly.

The sound made by the closing door was slight, but it reached the ears of Uncle Bedrock, and he realized he was probably a prisoner.

That made no difference to him.

On the other hand it rather added to his confidence, as it showed him he was on the right road. If he had been unexpectedly discovered there, an outcry of some kind would have followed.

He looked around the cellar, and saw that it was small, but rather well built to be under so unimportant a building. There was no visible window or outside door, and he recognized it might be a matter of some difficulty to make his escape from the place if he was really a prisoner.

"Ef it warn't fur Billy, now, I'd be sure thar war some snide game about it; but ther boy war honest in w'ot he s'ed, an' after I holped him outen sich a tight place he wouldn't go back on me fur ther fun ov ther thing. Thar's nothin' like waitin' ter see w'ot 'I turn up."

He placed the light on the floor, about the center of the cellar, and seated himself on the lowest stair to await developments.

He waited some time without hearing or seeing anything. He waited so long, in fact, his eyes began to get heavy.

Finally, he braced his back up against the wall, rested an elbow upon a stair above him, and to all appearances was fast asleep in a minute.

When he recovered his senses he heard a voice, near at hand, though he was in utter darkness, and no longer on the cellar steps.

"Worked to a charm, but he seems to be a long time coming around. He has nerve enough, or he never would have seated himself so quietly. The only question is, whether he is to be trusted. From his looks I should say he would be willing to take hold of 'most any job that there was coin or whisky in; but he would be just as apt to blather about it afterwards."

"If there was an afterwards," was the enigmatic answer.

"He can do the work in hand better than some one we know more about. By the time he gets through with it we will know better whether we need him for something else. At present he just fits into our hand."

"You are right; but still, I would feel easier if I knew more about him. The man seems genuine from the ground up, all but his name. If he has a better one, I would like to know it. It might tell more about who he really is. Anyhow, the thing has been managed very well, so far; and it is about time to wake him up."

"If you can, for the present. Poor fellow! That last drink at Mike's was too much for him. It was no wonder he felt sleepy. Some men would have been stone blind long enough before. It was a neat calculation."

Bedrock understood now that he had been trapped after all.

Although the place in which he found himself was in darkness, it was not the cellar in which he had gone to sleep.

He was no longer resting on the stairway, and though he was seated, or rather half reclining in a chair, his feet pressed a solid, board floor.

There was a feeble glimmer of light, and then a brighter flame. Some one approached the chair, and gazed down at him.

He hardly knew how the drug might be expected to work, but thought it as well to save the waste of any antidote which might be tried if he feigned unconsciousness. He opened his eyes, and gazed around him with a vacant stare.

"Ah! you are awake, are you? It is time. Are you 'most ready for business?"

"Betcher life!" mumbled Bedrock, straightening himself up in his chair.

"Can't call on Sandy too soon. Stir him up any hour ov ther day, er any day ov ther year, an' yer fin' him on deck, an' no ques'yuns ter ax."

"You are the man we are looking for. There is no use to tell you there is a gang. You ought to know it by this time. We want a few men with the nerve we think you have, and if you prove yourself able to fill the bill, there will be coin in it. Are you ready to make a corpse?"

"Ready, an' willin'. But I ain't a-doin' ov it fur cl'ar fun. Lemme heft it, an' I kin see my way clearer."

He held out his hand, and worked the fingers suggestively.

The fact that his interlocutor was masked, and held a revolver in close proximity to his head, did not trouble the old man in the least.

"You want to see what it is worth, do you, before you undertake the job. Not a bad notion when it comes to a thing of that kind. Perhaps your price might come too high, and so I will own up that I was only trying you. We want fellows who will stick at nothing; but the work on hand is not so serious as that. Here is a twenty for good luck, and if you give satisfaction you will get the mate to it; but it may take you several days to earn it. Are you willing to watch a prisoner that long, if we decide it is necessary, and guarantee he does not get away?"

"Jest so thar's money in it; an' I hev a chainece ter spend it when ther game's over. Fetch on yer pris'ner, an' give yer orders. I war 'way down ter low-water mark w'en I stumbled acrost me leetle side-pard, but ef this thing keeps on, I'll be jaybird yit. Like ter hev two jobs ov sich—er a dozzin'."

"They will come your way, sure enough. You see, it don't suit any of our men to be missing in case there is anything of a racket made, while with you it will make no difference, as you are a stranger. This way. Be a little careful, for you may find you are more tired than you think."

Bedrock arose to his feet, and though the caution was not altogether unnecessary, managed to stagger along, finding he was gaining strength at every step.

He did not have far to go, either.

Two doors and a narrow passage, the walls of which showed him he was still underground, and then he saw the man he understood he was to guard.

If the sight was a shock he managed to conceal the fact. In the death-white countenance of the bound man who lay before him he recognized the face of Pony Taylor.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed.

"Yer don't want me hyar. Ther gerloot are dead a'ready."

"Not dead yet, though he may be before we get done with him. But that is for some one else to say. All you have to do is to watch him and see that he does not get away. And be sure not to get yourself within reaching distance of those arms. He is the strongest man in the mines, and if he once gets them loose could tear a hole through a stone wall."

"An' ef he gits ter tearin'?"

"Tap him on the head. We want to save him if we can; but it would be better for you to kill him than let him get away."

"All right! I'll try him a bit, an' ef ther work are too tiresome I kin kill him an' sw'ar he war gittin' away. Oh, I got ther thing fine."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WAKENING FROM THE DRUG.

"WHERE am I?"

Pony Taylor came to his senses at last, though it was with a bewildered air that he asked the question, and without much hope of receiving an answer.

"Ye'r in ther bowils ov ther yearth, an' yer Onkle Bedrock are 'sponsible fur ther keepin' ov yer a'pree'sner. Don'tcher raise yer v'ice, er try any tricks on a lorn orfin, thet bez ter make a livin' ef it are by ther wages ov eeniquity."

Uncle Bedrock was squatted near, smoking a pipe, and as unconcerned as a man could well be under the circumstances. When he spoke he removed his pipe; but made no motion to go to the assistance of the sport. If he had not known something about the strength of those arms, that were reaching up even as Pony asked his question, perhaps he would have been more officious.

"You here! Ah, now I remember. You did warn me to keep away from the Flume; but I had no idea you were so well-acquainted with its inside work. I would never have thought you would have got quite this low."

"Don't be excited, ole man. Prehaps it's jest ez well it's me ez if it war some'un else. You kin bank on Ragged Rufe, every time; but ef it war some'un else, say Tommy Two feet, ez war a-holdin' ther box, you could figger it up easy jest how kind he'd be ter yer. In course, I didn't know it war you ez I war ter meet hyer, er I'd bin a heap anx'shushur ter come."

"I see the villains robbed me after I went through the trap. What a fool I was to allow myself to be deceived by all that nonsense he talked. Why didn't he poison me at once, and be done with it! What can he expect to make more out of me! And he surely dare not let me go after what he has done."

"Oh, yer talks too much at a time. Ez yer pockets are inside out I reckon thar ain't much left in 'em; but ef you'd tell me who done it I'd know a heap-sight better how ter ans'er yer other conunderums."

"Who? The square little sport who runs the Flume, of course. You must know that much, though."

Bedrock gave a long, low whistle.

"An' Billy Barton's his pard, eh? Now I hev did it. Ef he ain't a heap in fur me on 'count ov lass' night I'm a howlin' liar frum up the crick. Blame it all! I spect we're both pree'ners!"

"They seem to have been kind enough to leave you your tools, at any rate," answered Taylor, suspiciously.

"They wer'n't taking any risks with me, for they even tied my hands."

"They're loose now, though?"

"That goes without saying. Honor bright! Are you really the tool of these men? One never knows just how to take you if he only has looks to judge from."

"Reckon I'll hev ter be a tool fur ther peresent, tell I kin find out w'ot ther game are. After that, mebbe we kin both git away livin', though I'm beginnin' ter doubt. I laid ther gentle Johnny out on his back lass' night, an' he don't look like ther kind ter een'y it."

"You don't mean to stay you intend to stay in this hole, and keep me here, a moment longer than you can help?"

"That's about ther len'th ov it. I hev a ker-rackter ter substain, an' ef you walked inter ther trap after me warnin', I don't see ez I hev any call ter be mussyful. Lay still, thar, dog-gun ye, while I figger it all out—onless yer wants ter 'xplain a leetle w'ot ther reason are they're wringin' in a sanded deck on you."

Taylor acted as though he thought of getting up; and Bedrock lined him with all the promptness of a *bona fide* jailer. If he did not really intend to shoot, he played his part to the nature.

"Have it your own way," responded Taylor, a little bitterly.

"If you can't see they will probably kill us both before many hours are over, there is no use my trying to show you."

"I don't think so; I don't think so. They ain't dropped onder ther ole man yit; and onless yer kin show cause, I cain't see w'y they're goin' fur you so heavy. Didn't think you war a-kerryin' a millyun in yer britches pockets, did they?"

"I tell you it is something more than a game for any money they may have thought I had. This gambler and Doctor Rice are side-pards; and Rice is after Lyons or his daughter, and thinks I might be in the way. That's the only line I can figure it out on."

"Dunno, dunno! Not knowin' much about Doc Rice, an' less erbout ther man with a da'ter, I can't swear one way er t'other; but I heard su'thin' las' night thet I'd 'most bin furrigittin'; an' I dunno w'y I should reecommember now, 'less it's su'thin' ter do with it all. They do say a chap called Ready Rank are on ther trail ag'in. Kin yer see any connectshun?"

"No, no! That must be a mistake. If I know my grip I made the man a hopeless cripple. He will trouble the trail no more."

"Well, pard, I hope yer won't slip up on sich a dead sure thing, but I war goin' ter give yer warnin' ter-day, an' furgot it. Mebbe, by daylight it would 'a' seemed a leetle more likely."

Taylor had been somewhat abroad when he first came to his senses, but he recovered his nerve rapidly, and began to be something more like himself.

"You ought to know. You were in the game when we played it out. I thought afterward we might have made a surer thing of it, but from that day to this I have heard nothing of him. If he had been living, don't you think he would have been on my trail?"

"That's it ter a t-y, ty. He's got his growth ag'in, an' are a-rakin' up ole times. Ef I ain't mistaken he bu'sted through Gordot's Gulch shortly after you left it. W'ot's ther matter with him a-havin' bin a-huntin' fur you?"

"It might have been so. If that is the truth Heaven help Edna if he can get his hands on her again!"

"Frum w'ot I hev seen I reckon yer sister kin take purty good keer ov herself. It's Pony Taylor w'ot wants ter look out fur number one. I ain't sayin' but w'ot thar's reesks, but ther game'll show ez it begins ter d'velop. W'en we see w'ot they're goin' ter do with you, we'll know better w'os at ther rudder ov ther clam-scow."

"Much obliged for the interest you take in my affairs, but I would sooner be doing the investigating from the outside. It would be the safer for both of us."

"Safety don't count. Ef you kin git away spite ov Bedrock, git! But I kin be turrybul v'ilent w'en it's nesses'ry, an' I wouldn't 'dvide yer ter make me angry passhuns rise. Go ter sleep ag'in, that's a good boy, an' yer Unkel Bedrock'll watch over yer slumbers. He wants everythin' all pease an' quiet w'en ther boss comes; an' ef they kill yer it'll be over his dead body."

"A heap of satisfaction that will be to me," growled Taylor, shrugging his shoulders.

"I can't go for you like I would for another man, but don't carry the joke too far."

It did not seem to be any use to remonstrate, for Primrose sat down grimly, with his revolver in his hand, and refused to say another word.

Taylor would have liked to obtain some information as to where he was, but Bedrock knew little more about the spot than could be seen by the uncertain glimmer of the lamp, and for once had no desire to air any possible guesses. They were both underground, and the door was locked behind them.

After a little, the prisoner closed his eyes. He did not feel sleepy, but he wanted to think.

Though he did not know it, the drug still had some hold on him.

When he had got ready to think, he began to want to sleep more. In spite of himself he dropped into a slumber which lasted quite a while. When he awakened again he found he was as he had been, except that Bedrock had disappeared. Save for himself the prison pen was vacant.

Originally the hands and feet of Taylor had been tied.

When he came to himself he had slipped his hands out of the cords by instinct, and would have gone further had it not been for the warnings of Primrose.

Now, the first thing he did was to loosen himself altogether.

"The old rascal! I suppose the thing to do would be to trust everything to him, and hope for the best. I would, too, if I thought he knew what he was after. The chances are, he will just drift along, and trust to luck coming in our way near the close of the game. He may have gone out to explore; and yet, as the door was locked, how did he get away? More than likely we were both asleep, and they have carried him off to his reward. He was careful not to say how he came to get here, and the chances are his footing is slim enough. I think I may as well begin to look around for myself."

He arose from the floor, stretched his limbs, and moved cautiously to the door.

To his surprise he found that it yielded to his touch; and when he had drawn it open there was a narrow vaulted passage in front of him.

While he peered down this passage, wondering whether it would be best to try it, there was a light patter of footsteps, and Bedrock appeared, out of breath, whispering:

"They're a-comin' now. Git back ez you war; thar's no way hyer!"

CHAPTER XIX.

BEDROCK BREAKS A WINDOW.

"THAR'S a chance now, fur you ter make a break, an' fur me ter save me neck an' still keep in with ther gang," continued Primrose, as he drew Taylor back into the den, and closed and locked the door behind them.

The latter operation was performed with a key of his own that he replaced in his pocket.

"Jest make out thet yer hev'n't come ter yer senses tell they git ter foolin' round yer. Then, bu'st ther ropes, an' cut loose onder thet passidge. You can't be no wuss off ner yer be; an' ef they've furgot ter close ther other door you'll find yerself in a cellar onder ther doctor's off'us. Take five good steps, an' yer kin ter ther stairs. After that, jest scoot, an' leave me ter play me hand alone. I'm able fur 'em, an' I hope it'll be 'bout any shootin'."

"Fix it to suit yourself, so you don't want to truss me up too tight. I believe in your good intentions, but I'm not taking too many risks."

Taylor knew that Bedrock was a far better man than he seemed, even though at heart he was as genuine a tramp as ever walked the roads. He threw himself down in the position he had been in when he regained his consciousness, except that he had a trifle better view of the door, and allowed Bedrock hastily to arrange the ropes which had been on wrists and ankles. They looked as tight as ever, but Pony was sure he could drop them off at the slightest exertion.

Then Primrose took his own position, just as the key grated again in the lock.

The door opened cautiously, and as it did so Bedrock started from his crouching position.

He had a revolver in each hand, and one of these weapons commanded the door, while the other was pointed ostentatiously at the prisoner.

"Don't turn that thing this way," said the voice of the man who had left him in charge.

"I was afraid the fellow had received a stronger dose than was intended; and it looks as though he had. Hasn't he moved yet?"

There was a slight trace of trouble in the tone, and Primrose detected it. If he had it to do over again he would perhaps have made different arrangements; but it was now too late.

"Wouldn't go nigh him, ef I war you. Ther blamed gerloot might bite. He's jest beginnin' ter wiggle—an' it war time."

"No danger if he has been having that long a nap. It will take him half an hour to be able to raise his hand. And I wouldn't have had him croak for big money—not yet."

Primrose looked curiously at the man.

He was masked, and his clothing was too rough not to be a disguise, when the thoroughbred nature of that voice was considered. It might be Jack Harper was hidden under that garb, but if so it was more than the average man could do to identify him without a closer look.

Whoever the man was, he advanced to the side of the prisoner, and bending down scanned him, or attempted to scan him, closely.

He started back again, with an oath, but the start was made too late.

Taylor's wrists shot apart as though they had suddenly wrenched asunder the cords which bound them, and the nearer hand continued the

motion, snatching at knife which stuck in the belt of the man bending over him.

There was a flash of steel as the blade came out of its scabbard, and darted down to cut away the cords at his feet. Then, Taylor sprung up, shooting out his fist as he rose, and bounded toward the door.

The blow hardly went home, for as it came the man was shrinking back, his hand at the same time darting to a pistol. He staggered, and then turned completely around, lurching heavily against Bedrock, who was apt enough to spring in his way.

In spite of the rough treatment he had received Pony Taylor had no desire to kill unless it was at the last moment, when his escape demanded it.

Hastily he thrust the knife behind him, bilt downward, into his hip pocket, and leaped to the door.

He was uncertain what he might meet there, and crouched low as he sprung.

A fortunate thing it was that he did so, for right on the threshold appeared another masked man, who had been standing guard without, and had caught the sound of the struggle.

This man shot first, and thought afterward. The ball whistled over the head of the sport, so closely he could feel the wind of its passage, and it was almost a miracle it did not find a victim in one of the two men beyond. It passed between them, and flattened itself against the wall.

Bedrock gave a yell, and the man who was wrenching himself from his arms uttered a curse; but there was no time for another shot.

Once more Taylor was striking out, and this stroke cleared the passage.

Bounding over the prostrate man he dashed along the passage, his hand thrust out in front of him. Before he had taken many steps he came violently against a door.

Fortunately it was not bolted, and it swung open, with just enough of friction to save him from an ugly fall.

"Five steps," he thought, "and then the stairway. It looks like a cowardly thing, but if the old man wants it this way perhaps I had better go and leave him to work out his own scheme. He can't be in any danger, and he is healed and able to take care of himself if he is. The man that pulls the wool over his eyes very far will have to get up early in the morning."

He had slept off the influence of the drug entirely, and never felt more like himself. Had it not been that Primrose appeared so anxious to retain his footing with the villains who had him in tow the sport would have turned even then, and gone back. As it was, he laughed to himself as his foot touched what he thought must be the staircase. The escape all appeared so easily managed.

Up he went, noiselessly enough, for he did not know what might be in the office Bedrock had spoken of. The trap-door above was closed, but it yielded to a thrust of his shoulders, and giving a spring as he straightened up, he bounded into the middle of the room, the trap softly dropping to its place once more.

Then he looked around him—and laughed in earnest.

"I must have made a mistake in the stairway," he thought as he surveyed the room.

He was once more in the den where Jack Harper and he had begun their little game.

He found the room vacant, and the road to the outer air was before him, but he hesitated, looking curiously around.

In one corner was a desk, and in a pigeon-hole lay a revolver.

"Don't know that I am yearning to make a trade till I know this is as good a tool, but it seems the best I can do, and if Johnny is willing we'll call it square on that load of poles."

As he spoke he caught up the weapon, and thrusting it alongside of the knife in his hip-pocket, turned toward an inner door. Softly he raised the latch, and coolly sauntered out into the main saloon.

Meantime, there was a chance for Uncle Bedrock to make his escape with flying colors, and if he did not improve the opportunity it was because he wasted time in picking up the man who had fallen in the passage, to Pony Taylor's stroke.

"I've got him!" he shouted.

"This hyer time ther cuss don't git away. I and a hand ter put ther straps on, an' tame ther kickin' rooster!"

As he spoke he dragged forward a rough-looking customer, from whose face a mask was hanging by loosened strings, and bending over him as they got within the glare of the lamp, he had a view of the face of the unfortunate Tommy Twofeet.

"You infernal fool!" gritted the other man, who had managed to stagger away from Primrose's grasp a moment before, and who had but just recovered his head.

"That's not the man. Bring the lamp, and follow as closely as you can. If the spring in the trap has caught we may get him yet, but I don't want him to have the chance to knife me in the dark. How could I have been so infernal careless?"

There was a coolness about the man, whoever

he was, that Bedrock admired, and yet was not altogether glad to see. He attempted to follow his orders, but before three steps had been taken was away in the rear. Before Primrose was out of the passage he thought he heard the trap-door swinging at the head of the stairs.

He could think of nothing better to do than to follow after, as rapidly as possible. There was no certainty what sort of reception he would meet with above, but he would sooner be called to question above ground than below. Placing the lamp on the floor he made his way up as silently as he could, and found himself, to his great satisfaction, in the room at the rear of the office.

He might have made his exit through a window, but he was in too great haste to raise the sash, and did not care to break it. Without hesitation he passed out into the other room.

His coming seemed to be a thunderclap to two men who were sitting there, conversing in a low tone, and one of them without a word of warning sprung at his throat.

The attack was too sudden for Bedrock to dodge it. The fingers were tightening around his windpipe before he had time.

"Who in Hades are you?" gritted a strange voice.

"What are you doing here, and what do you want?"

"Jest w'ot I war thinkin' ter ax you. Mebbe you kin ans'er it fur me," spluttered Bedrock, uncertain what tack to take, and strugging his shoulders up as though in fear of a blow.

"Lemme down easy, boss. I jest crawled in thar fur a snooze while I war a-waitin' fur ther pillman. It's reel kind in him ter hev a bunk fur a pore, tired pilgrim, w'ot bez ter wait his chance, an' ain't got stren'th ter stan'. Ef you're ther boss I wanter consultashun."

"I'll consult you!" was the savage answer, as the doctor began to force him back toward the door.

"If you have been snoozing in my bunk I'll skin you alive, and I'm not sure I won't blow your brains out afterward."

"Thankee, boss; but don't choke quite so hard. It makes me weak. I hed er live ter give yer 'bout my case, ef yer ain't shook it outen my pockets. Let up, won'cher?"

Primrose hardly made a struggle. He thought it possible the other man might not be as far behind the scenes as he felt sure the doctor was, and was willing to retire to the other room for explanation.

"Did they get him?" he asked, eagerly, as he pushed the door shut behind them.

"Get who, you infernal bummer? I want to see what you have been doing here before I shoot."

"Thankee, sur, you better had," responded Primrose, meekly.

As he spoke he thrust his chin downward with a suddenness that broke the grip on his throat, and dodging the outstretched arm had his captor around the waist. Then, there was a jingle of breaking glass as the doctor went through the window, followed closely by Primrose. The latter had his chance and was away.

CHAPTER XX.

EDNA SEES TOO MUCH.

WHEN Taylor went out to view the town by lamplight Mr. Lyons and Edna had nothing to do but to talk to each other.

They had been doing that for so long previous to the coming of the sport that now it began soon to seem rather tiresome, lonesome work.

That, again, put Edna in a suspicious humor.

"You have no doubts of this man, I suppose," thoughtfully murmured the girl.

"He is such an utter stranger it seems odd we should have confided so utterly in him. If he proves false he knows as much as we, and perhaps more, about the hidden gold. Would it not have been well to have tried him a little longer?"

"If he was an ordinary man he could not so soon have impressed me with his honesty. If he is true, he is the one man I would have asked to meet."

"If he is true—yes."

"But we might have waited a lifetime and not had the opportunity to test him so thoroughly again. Cool, brave, and able to take care of himself and friends under any circumstances; after he had saved my life, and rescued you from the bounds who would have recaptured you for a fate worse than death, how could I doubt that it was a move of fate in our favor?"

"True; and yet it seems strange that a man such as he seems would be a wandering outcast, so to speak. What if he should be in league with the enemies we know we have in this very town?"

"I have no fear of it. And at the worst he can do us but little harm before we find him out. A week from now and we will be ready for the journey. In a week of intercourse if he is not a friend he will betray himself. And when I am myself again that will be all I ask."

"Do not be too sure. In the hands of a man like he is we might be finding ourselves little more than children. Were it not for leaving you here alone I would follow him to-night."

"Do not attempt it. I have no fears for myself. I am stronger than I had hoped to be, and could start on a journey to-night if necessary; or with my one good hand protect myself against a dozen. But you might be in more danger than ever. I am sure this house has been watched, and that you would be followed from the moment you left the door."

"Enough of that, then. Let time decide. Since you are so sure of this stranger I will not attempt to shake your confidence in him, though I wish I could feel as you do. Rest if you can, and I will watch until he returns."

The suspicions of his daughter seemed to have no exciting effect upon Mr. Lyons.

In fact, they rather had a tranquilizing result.

When Edna, after a few moments' silence, looked at the quiet figure upon the bed she saw the eyes of the man were closed, and that he was drifting into slumber.

She was careful not to disturb him.

Another five minutes passed, and then she was sure he slept.

"He is safe enough here," she murmured.

"If the house is watched the danger will be for me; and I will keep so keen an eye around that I will be able to take care of myself. Besides, I will be inside of the town, instead of outside, and a single cry would certainly bring the assistance which even here it might be hard to get."

She arose, and after bending over her father to make sure he was sleeping, glided into the other room.

When she returned, if Taylor had been there he would have had to look twice to recognize her.

She was dressed as she had been more than once during their wanderings, and now looked like a rather well-appearing boy.

Cautiously she slipped out of the door, and made her way toward the town. If there was any watcher she did not see him, and without any positive objective point she drifted toward the Flume.

She was not more than half an hour behind Taylor, and passing by the open door had a glimpse of the sport just at the time Harper was moving up to accost him. She strolled on a little further, and then turned. There was nothing suspicious so far; but then, it was not far from the Flume to the office of Doctor Rice.

Again fate favored her. She saw two men come out of the main room of the saloon, and re-enter the building by the side door.

"It looks like a verification of my suspicions," she thought.

"Surely they must be going into the private room to have a confidential interview. And I have heard that Rice often goes there. If I am not mistaken, as I hope I am, I am in luck. There may be an honesty of purpose in all this, but it looks like treachery. If there is a secret council I must see something of it, even if I cannot hear."

To see without danger of being seen was impossible, but she took all the precautions she could.

She wandered along the street, her gaze darting here and there, exploring every shadow where some one might be lurking; and returning, she slipped along by the side of the house and peeped in at the window.

There was a blind, but a fortunate crack had been left at the bottom.

The two men were seated opposite to each other, with cards and coin between them, but did not seem very intent on the game.

There was a bottle of wine on the table, and the two held their glasses in their hands, while Jack Harper was murmuring something in a low tone.

"Is it a conspiracy, and are the cards but a blind? There seems to be no one else there, but it is not too late for the doctor to come. I had better slip away again for a few moments. If I can hear nothing, I can read between the lines from what I can see."

Again she came back, and this time saw something which had not been counted on.

The game seemed to be in earnest now. The face of Jack Harper was toward the watcher, and she caught a certain gleam in his eyes which Pony Taylor missed altogether.

She looked on in breathless interest, not altogether understanding what she saw, but certainly, things were nearing a climax.

She saw the cards spread out, and then Pony Taylor's arms dropping helplessly on the table.

What had happened? Was the man sick? Was he dying? Had there been foul play?

For answer she saw Taylor and his chair drop swiftly out of sight.

There was no time for a scream, that might have betrayed more than her presence. As her mouth opened, a hand caught her by the neck, and another grasped her coat collar.

"Spyin' hyer, be yer? Don't yer go ter yellin'. Ef yer see'd ar'ythin' wu'th ther tellin', spit her out. Thar may be a spec' in it fur ther both ov us. An' talk yer got to, er go dead bu'st."

Taken so entirely off her guard, it would not have been strange if she had forgotten everything but the sight so lately seen. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell the whole truth.

And if she had done so at first, she would have

told more than she meant to. An excited woman, pouring out such a tale, would have spoken her sex before a dozen words had been uttered.

Fortunately, the grip on her neck was strong enough to give her pain, and the counter-shock put her senses on the alert.

She noted that at the very best this man wanted her secret so that he might use it. If he saw money in it for himself, he would not be particular what disposition he made of her. She writhed around, seeking to break away.

"No, yer don't, leetle one. Thar war a game ov some kind, an' I wanten know w'ot it war. Spit her out, er I'll cut it out. I'm ther bad man frum up ther crick, an' I ain't a-warnin' yer twice."

The fellow drew a big knife with one hand, while with the other he tightened his grip on her collar.

Edna was uncertain what he would do, but she knew better than to tell him what she had really seen. If she could have wrenched herself away she would have done it without uttering a sound.

But she had tried that, and failed. The knife looked very dangerous, and something had to be done.

"Take your hands off. I wanted to see what Jack Harper looked like, that was all. He's there and you can look for yourself."

"W'ot bizzness are it ov yourn w'ot Jack Harper looks like? Mebbe yer got s'uthin' in fur him that's w'uth while fur a pard ter know."

"No, I never saw him before in my life, and I don't know that I want to see him again. Let go there. It's none of your business anyhow."

"We'll see about that. Don't yer whimper, kid. Ef yer does ther knife goes in, up to ther han'le. We wants ter git ter bedrock on this, an' I reckon ther boss in thar kin tell better w'ot she are."

So far she had managed to disguise her voice, so that the man had no suspicion of her being other than she seemed, though it was plain he was puzzled where to place her. His next move was a surprise.

Still watching her sharply to see she did not give him the slip, he leaned toward the window, and rapped lightly on it with the blade of his knife.

The tapping was a signal which seemed to be understood by Harper, who was still in the room. Without hesitation he turned down the light and then came, not to the window but to door.

"Hyer's a kid I ketched a-lookin' in. He sez he didn't see nothin', but you kin jedge ef yer thinks it's w'uth while fur me ter hev ketched him. Cash goes, an' he's yourn fur a dollar."

"How long ago was it you found him there? And are you certain you wern't peeking yourself?"

"Didn't have ther chance. W'en I come he war thar. It mout'a' bin two minnits ago. It couldn't a-bin much longer an' we's wasted that much chinnin'."

Harper did not appear the least flustered, though he understood the situation. In a cold, hard voice he answered:

"If he was there two minutes ago he saw too much; and if he missed it by a trifle it's not well to take much risk till we know more about him. Bring him in."

"All right, pard. I tried to pump him, but he hadn't anything ter say. Played off mighty innercent, an' ef I hedn't felt him a-tremblin' I might let him go."

"See that he makes no racket. It's safe enough to bring him in. There is no other way."

"He knows. Ef he makes ther lightest yawp it's ther end ov him. Ther knife are jest a-etchin' ter tickle his innards. Step out, thar, kid, er I'll do s'uthin' more ner talk."

At first Edna had thought only of getting away. If she could only break away she had no fear but what she could make a safe retreat.

Now, she thought of the revolver in her pocket. She was not wise in such things, but instinct told her that at the distance, if she could get her thumb on the hammer, and her finger on the trigger, she could hardly miss. Quietly she dropped her hand to her pocket.

CHAPTER XXI.

MR. LYONS HAS A VISITOR.

THE movement seemed to her innocent enough to escape notice, but she was dealing with a man who understood its significance even better than she.

Before her hand was lost to sight there was a gripe on her elbow, and she was flung back over the knee of her captor, who quickly shifted his other hand so that it covered her mouth.

"Ther durned leetle cuss wanted ter shoot frum his pocket. Take hole on him. Ef he gits his gun off it'll draw a crowd that'll want ter know a heap sight too much afore leavin'."

Jack Harper took a hand in; and between them Edna was whisked inside before she realized what was the intention. There was but one thing to do with her, and she felt that the trap would be opened for her as she had seen it yawn

for Pony Taylor. Helpless and speechless, she was being dragged toward the side of the table and the spot where Taylor had been seated.

Harper left her to the hands of his assistant, while he turned up the lamp once more. Then he leaned forward toward the bell.

"Watch out, now, and when it opens throw him down! It will not harm him, and after that the work will be in my hands."

The spring was pressed, the trap opened as before, and the man slid his hands from her mouth to her shoulder to obtain a better purchase. As he did so Jack obtained a better view of her face.

"Hold on, there!" he shouted.

"Your kid turns out to be a woman in boy's clothes. Who is she?"

He turned away from the table, and the trap closed of its own accord. The discovery he had made seemed to give him more trouble than the knowledge that his actions had been spied upon through the uncurtained window.

His assistant was startled, too.

When Jack Harper talked that way he meant business, and the fellow was not sure but that in some way he had made a mistake. His hands loosened, and he tried to stammer out some words of surprise and explanation.

Edna was ready for the opportunity.

Like a flash she dodged under his arm, and darted for the door, leaving him standing directly in the way of the gambler. She had listened, and knew the men had not taken time to turn the key in the lock, or to shoot a bolt.

The door yielded to her touch, and she sprang out into the darkness. Behind her she heard the crash of the men coming together, and gave a little laugh to herself as she bounded out upon the street. Though there was no one in sight she felt sure of escape.

She had a start of perhaps half a minute, and could run like a deer; but the chances were not as much in her favor as she supposed. The two men lost a trifle of time, but they were at the corner of the Flume, just as she was passing through the glare from the windows of a neighboring saloon, and the first of the two threw up his hand and halted suddenly.

He was just crooking his finger when Harper seized him by the wrist.

"None of that, Twofoot! It's my risk, and I'll chance it before sending her up the flume. You want to play light with your triggers till I give the word. Pull foot up around Bandy Bruce's shanty, and see if you can't head her off. I'll keep track of where she goes to."

"All right! She don't know me, an' I wouldn't keer of she did. It's your feet ez are in ther hopple. Ef I ketch her, you'll hear her shout-in'."

The two were already separating, and Harper made no answer. He ran on softly after the flying girl, though he began to see that there was danger in overtaking her, even more, perhaps, than in the letting her go.

"There is only one girl it can be; and I'll sooner drop the Flume into a hole in the ground, and send the top after it, than harm her. If I knew how much she saw, I would know better what to think. I'll keep her in sight, anyhow, and if she goes straight home, there is no great rush, until I find out what she knows."

He was thinking this as he flew along, and he rather wished he had not sent Tommy on as he had done. He might attract attention, if nothing more. For himself, he could wander all over Mineral Bar with a revolver in either hand, and though it might excite comment, no one would be apt to follow him, and few would ask questions where he could hear them.

Tommy was a little too slow, however. Although he had the shorter track, he saw the seeming boy flitting on ahead when he turned the corner of Bruce's shanty, and as he puffed along in her wake, he was joined by the gambler.

"The game will strike straight for Lyons's cabin, and if it does, and in, it is all right. Keep it in sight, and if you lose it there come back and let me know. If I am not about, say yes to Johnny, and that will be enough. I must go back."

Tommy went off as ordered, but, to himself, grumbled as he went along:

"Dog-gone it! I'd like ter know w'ot she did see, but blamed ef I keer ter move up that way ter ax her. Ef ther sport comes wanderin' back he might give a feller one more squeeze that'd be ther cend ov him. An' ther ole man'll be apt ter be soddin' 'round ther winder with a shotgun. But it won't do ter go back ter Jack Harper 'bout ther truth, so, legs, do yer duty. He might 'a' g'n me a wuss job. He's mighty easy satisfied, an' ther kid couldn't 'a' seen so much, arter all."

The task was not a difficult one, as Tommy had thought.

Edna ran straight toward her home. She was frightened and perplexed. Had it not been for her capture by Truefit, she might have created a sensation in the town by calling upon the citizens to organize a raid upon the Flume; but after her own narrow escape, she never thought of doing it.

Of course, she knew she was pursued, and more than once expected there would be shooting

in her direction. The revolver in her hand was ready, and it was as well that Tommy did not get too close. As long as she was outpacing him, she hesitated about opening the ball.

The evening was well advanced, and there were but few persons on the street, while of these it happened she met directly none. When she reached the house she entered softly, and found her father still asleep.

Tommy remained on guard for a short time, watching the house, but she did not reappear.

Then he took courage and crawled up to the window. Peering into the larger room he saw Edna, clothed in her regular garments, and seated by the side of her slumbering father. For the present there was no appearance of danger, and he turned back to the Flume to report.

Mr. Lyons was getting along as well as could be expected. It was tedious, of course, to remain quiet when he wanted to be acting, but as it was the best thing for him to do he had done it. When he went to sleep he did it soundly, and if nothing had occurred he would probably have slumbered far into the night.

When Edna seated herself by his bedside she was nervously anxious to tell him what she thought she had seen, but dreaded to waken him. She remained silent, to be sure; but her eyes were fixed intently on his face, and as a matter, of course, they had their effect. After a little he moved uneasily, and finally awoke.

Even then he remained silent for a little, after a glance to make sure his daughter was watching him. Finally, he spoke:

"Foolish child! I need no watching. It would be better for you to be sleeping. I suppose Mr. Taylor has not come in yet."

"No; and I doubt now if he comes at all if I can believe what I am sure I saw."

"What do you mean?" he asked, somewhat annoyed by the tone, and thinking that Edna too must have been dreaming.

Then she took courage, and told him of her adventure. There was considerable to explain, and once started she made quite a story of it.

Mr. Lyons listened gravely, without suspecting what the climax was to be until it came.

He was too much shocked to speak at once, and so Edna had the chance to go on and tell of her own peril, and how it was only the chance discovery of her sex which saved her from sharing the fate of Mr. Taylor.

As she told of her narrow escape, and of the pursuit which followed, Mr. Lyons struggled as if he was about to rise from his bed, though the hand of his daughter was pressing him back.

"Wait, wait!" she went on.

"You can help only by your advice. What am I to do?"

Lyons became cooler.

"Are you certain you saw what you say?"

"I was not so sure what it meant until the trap opened for me. After that, how could I doubt?"

"True. And yet it is hard to say what should be done. The trap might be found if we could get the force to make a search; but it is not likely Mr. Taylor would be there. They went back to spirit him away."

"And he may not be harmed. Harper told the man who caught me, that the fall would not harm."

"True; and if he had killed Taylor the man would not have spared your life solely because you were a woman. Even on the street he would have shot you down."

"But the uncertainty of it! If I had only been more courageous! A scream would have brought help; and instead of giving it I had to shiver in the hands of a man with a knife."

"Better as it is. I have heard of such things before. Harper has a following that would back him through thick and thin, and you would only have gotten yourself into danger. He may have drugged the man to rob him, and then throw him out. If he could accomplish his ends in no other way he would not hesitate at that. We can trust no one here by daylight, and for you to attempt any move at this time of night would be reckless folly. You would be stopped on the road. I might go with you, but—I do not see my way clear. Let us think it over."

Mr. Lyons could see the danger in the way of immediate effort. And if Pony Taylor should happen to turn up again by morning—he had no doubts at all in regard to his good faith—it might be best to have said nothing about the strange affair.

They talked some little about it between themselves, however, and after a while, when Mr. Lyons had succeeded in showing how unfortunate it would be if they were compelled to mix themselves up in the affairs of Jack Harper, they heard a step approaching the door.

It was the step of a single man, and gave Edna no particular fright, though she was sure it was not made by their missing lodger.

When the man outside halted it was at the door; and without delay there came a knock which sounded as though made by a man accustomed to going where he wanted to and meeting a welcome when he came.

"Who is there?" asked Mr. Lyons.

"Late for a call, am I?" came back the answer. "I only heard of your accident a little while ago, and came around to see how you

were, and if I could be of any use. Am I too late to see you?"

"It is Doctor Rice," said Edna, and at a motion from her father she moved toward the door.

CHAPTER XXII.

BEDROCK SEEKS A REFUGE.

THE doctor stepped in without hesitation; and with barely a nod to Miss Edna moved over to the bedside.

"I was out of town yesterday for I suppose you would have sent for me. Don't know how your little accident got out, but I heard a couple of the boys talking about it and got particulars as far as they knew them. Bad place, that old prospect-hole! Ought to be filled up, or fenced up. On a dark night any man might wander off the trail. You were lucky to get out so well."

"My arm is gone up," explained Lyons, as he saw the doctor offering his hand, while running on about the accident.

"It is hardly equal to a shake just yet."

"No, not of course not. What am I thinking of? But is that the extent of your injuries? Nothing wrong inside, I hope."

"Nothing but a little soreness. I will be up and about to-morrow."

"Don't be in too great a hurry. A few days lost now may add a good many days of comfort to the other end. What I want to get at is, whether that arm is in shipshape fashion. You don't want to be a cripple for life, nor yet to have it broken over again about the time the bones fairly knit."

"Thanks, but I know something of such things and think I can guarantee the workmanship. I'll take the chances. It is going on well, and all I seem to want is to sleep, eat, and be merry."

"Glad to hear you in such good spirits. It won't be long before you will be out again. Meantime, I am at your service if I can be of any use to you. I mean, outside of the professional line. And, by the way, who is my rival?"

He glanced at the arm as he spoke.

"He seems to understand his business, and I would be glad to make his acquaintance."

"Oh, he is a stranger, that seemed to wander providentially to the spot. He had the strength and courage to help me out, and the wit and wisdom to put me together afterward. His name is Taylor, and he will stop with me a few days. He strolled down-town to try his fortunes at the Flume, and has not returned, though I am expecting him momentarily."

The doctor stroked his long beard thoughtfully, and then peered up at Mr. Lyons from under his gold-mounted spectacles.

He was one of the best-dressed men in Mineral Bar, and, with the exception of Jack Harper, there was no one in the town who could be as engaging when he tried.

"Just a word of caution," he said at length, bending closer to the bed.

"I have heard of this Taylor, and probably caught a glimpse of him on the street to-day. He is a clever fellow, but he has the reputation of being a desperado, pure and simple, in spite of the engaging manner of his ways. Don't you think it a little risky trying to domesticate the tiger?"

From the time he entered, a study was being made of the doctor. Mr. Lyons had met him more than once, and so far had never been able to clearly decide what lay behind his purring ways. He was not sure he understood him even now. He glanced up with a look which was a good deal blander than his feelings.

"In what way?"

"You have a daughter, in whom, I am afraid, I am beginning to take more than ordinary interest. He is hardly the man you would care to allow approach her too closely."

"Thank you for the caution, but I assure you it is not needed. There is a certain amount of gratitude needed, under the circumstances. Outside of that, his relations with us will be purely business. At the same time I think you are mistaken in your opinion of the gentleman, and wish you could meet him. I have known more than one man who was worse than his reputation, and now and then I have met with a few who were better. I think he is one of the few."

There was a coldness about the words of the injured man that showed the doctor he had ventured on delicate ground. And there was no mention of Edna, though he had so pointedly alluded to her.

"It sometimes costs something, out here, to give good advice, but there is no extravagance in listening to it. It would be better for you to depend on those in whom you can trust, than place yourself at the mercy of a stranger. I hope you will not have occasion to remember what I have been saying when it is too late."

"I am placing myself at the mercy of no man, whether he be known or unknown. And I shall take good care of Edna—if she needs it. There are worse places than Mineral Bar, and while I am under the weather I think I can trust to its citizens to stand by me if I need them. When out again I am my own insurer."

"Perhaps you are right; and right or wrong, I see that in your present mood it is useless to talk to you further about the things I might be willing to mention. I ran in as a matter of duty but must be off again. Take care of yourself, and if you need me, send for me. Good-night."

He knew that Edna had slipped out of the room when he first began the conversation. He heard her moving in the adjoining apartment, but did not wait. After his stateliest manner he bowed himself out, and Mr. Lyons could hear his retreating footsteps.

Edna came hurriedly in when there was no danger of his return.

"You said nothing to him about the tragedy at the Flume? He cannot suspect I was there?"

"I said nothing, yet I think he has his suspicions. I have heard that he and the gambler are more than friends, and that he owns the ground on which the Flume is built, even if he has not an interest in the earnings of the house. If I were to give a guess, I should say he came here to form an opinion as to what you really saw."

"Why not have told him the truth? Knowing what we knew, they would not have dared to harm him."

"I am not so sure but what the other is the better plan. If no one but Taylor knows what has happened, they may make some bargain and then turn him loose. Or, perhaps, he has not yet come to his senses, and they may leave him somewhere to recover at his leisure."

Mr. Lyons guessed as aptly as though he had been in the business himself. For a time Edna was quieted, though her fears for the safety of the sport were not altogether dissipated. She could not rid herself of her curiosity as to his fate, even though she felt that a man of his resources must be able to make his escape.

"If father would only go to sleep again, I think I would risk another trip through the town," was her thought.

"They might recognize me now, but of that, what difference? I see now I was too ready to run. A little firmness when I once had them at arm's length, and I might have saved him."

Her father had guessed better than either of them knew. Just about this time Jack Harper was telling his hired ally, Tommy Twofeet, that the girl had seen nothing, but there was a little job for him to help do.

"There is a chap who tumbled into the cellar, and I am afraid he can't get out unless some one helps him out. We can carry him between us, but first I want to make sure he has not a paper on him that ought to belong to me. A pard of mine is keeping his valuables for him till he gets out, but somehow he missed the paper."

How they went down, and what followed, the reader already knows.

Pony Taylor made his way back to the saloon, which he had left to have a private game with its proprietor; and following a different route, Uncle Bedrock landed in the office of the doctor, and found the latter at home.

Primrose acted promptly, and on the spur of the moment, but if he had taken ever so long a time to consider, he would have worked his game in the same way. If the doctor was behind the scenes, as he more than suspected, it looked as though he meant mischief all the same; and if he was not, it was as well not to make explanations at present.

The doctor had, for a miracle, passed through the window without hurting himself at all seriously. There were a few bruises, but no blood was drawn, and he was on his feet almost as soon as he struck the ground.

Quick though he was he missed Primrose, who bounded clean over his head as he was rising, and shot around the corner of the house just as a pistol filled Rice's hand.

The doctor rushed forward, and halting at the corner of the building threw up the weapon; but lowered it again. Ragged Rufe was stepping softly through the doorway of the Flume.

Without a second glance Rice turned back and re-entered the office.

Considering the nature of his exit from the place the previous evening, the Flume was hardly the place for Bedrock to take refuge. Jack Harper was not likely to either forget or forgive.

Nevertheless, the man of rags entered without a sign of hesitation.

Chance had left a tolerably clear lane directly to the bar, and through this he steered his course. His battered old hat was pushed back from his forehead, a genial smile fairly blazed over his ruddy countenance, his thumbs were thrust into the arm-holes of his vest, and as he walked he jerked his feet up, and set them down flatly, with a bend of the knee that was scarcely perceptible.

"Hyar's ther ole man ag'in, drunk ez us'all!" he chuckled.

"Right in town, an' all dressed up! At ten cents a drink a couple dozen of yer step along, drink with Sandy Soaker, the sport from Sawdust City."

And to himself he mumbled:

"Ef that don't fetch ther boss it'll be 'cause he ain't 'round, er bez furdur use fur yourn truly."

There were plenty there to recognize the man

who had excited so much commotion the previous evening, and there were others who wanted to be amused and took the chances. It was a crowd of the latter followed him up to the bar, and watched the tumbler-juggler with critical eyes as Primrose threw down a gold piece and exclaimed:

"My frien's, Johnny, all my frien's. Sot 'em up fur 'em, an' sot 'em up twice fur me. It's a orful dry time fur co'n."

Johnny recognized the man, but he also heard the ring of his coin. He looked over the crowd in his wake, and without a word spread out tumbler accordingly.

"You raised a racket here last night, and got off all right. This time I reckon the boss will kill you, but you may as well be driving a few nails while you are waiting. I don't know that I want to tackle you myself."

And while the bottle was going down the line Pony Taylor slid into place with the rest, and quietly remarked:

"Something a little smoother, Johnny. I have a bad taste in my mouth, and want something to rinse it down."

There was a crash as Johnny dropped the tumbler he was handling. He stared at the sport as though looking at a ghost, and pony Taylor knew, if no one else did, what was passing in his mind.

At almost the same moment Jack Harper came sauntering through the door by which Pony had entered the room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PRIMROSE RUNS THE FLUME.

BEDROCK took in the situation at once.

Up to that moment he supposed Taylor had made good his retreat, and was probably far enough away from the spot.

Now, he saw the young man was still on hand, and from his deadly smooth style believed he was out on the war-path.

Glancing warily around, to see if there was any sign of trouble brewing from the other side, he caught a glimpse of Jack Harper gliding in.

"Dog-gone ther jim-blasted luck! Ef this thing goes on he'll kill him sure w'en they git ter foolin'. An' that won't suit my han' w'uth a cent. Ef Gentleman Jack knowed ez much about Pony Taylor ez I do he'd lay low tell ther mad wore off a leetle, an' then mebhe he wouldn't fin'e him so strickly fatal. Bedrock, you better run this yere thing yer own way, an' leave ther fun you war goin' ter hev fur some other evenin'."

Considering his previous experience Primrose would have been justified in thinking of himself, but it never seemed to strike him that Harper might feel himself compelled to take hold of the man who had turned the laugh on him so completely the night before, tramp though he might be.

The bartender was so taken aback that he had not a word to say while he turned mechanically for the decanter he thought might suit better the taste of the man who had apparently risen from the dead.

"Young man, yer looks innercent an happy," began Bedrock, speaking with sternness, and pointing one pudgy finger at Taylor.

"P'rhaps you hev a chileless mother, er a widderless orphin, 'pendin' on ther labor ov yer han's. Fur us ole stagers them things don't count, but ef I war in your place, jest a-buddin' up inter bloomin' manhood, I'd stop short on ther giddy path. I can't reconcile it with me consens ter holpe along in ther rooin yer seem ter be bound on makin'."

Ragged Rufe was deeply impressed with a sense of Taylor's folly, if looks went for anything; and utterly unconscious of anything like insult in his manner. He gave a stare of surprise at the roar of laughter from the men who had hastily emptied their tumblers to make sure of their contents, and then eagerly waited for what was to follow.

"You think?" answered Pony, calmly, drawing toward the liquor which Johnny had placed within reaching distance.

"I saw the number mentioned in your invitation was not full and came forward under your request. From your appearance I should say you were a gentleman and a scholar. As such you must understand that it has passed beyond your control. If you don't whack up the needful, Johnny, here, will try his club; and if he has to strain too hard I'll help."

Pony was a new man there, to the most of them, and from his appearance few would have thought he was of the kind to quarrel with a man of the stamp of the tumbler, much less wring in on him for a drink. Was there anything behind it all?

Jack Harper, halting a moment at the door, and taking in the scene at a glance, thought there was.

"The infernal old idiot! He means business, and don't care where he finds it. Let him start it, if he chooses. I begin to think he is square after all, and if he can't take care of himself perhaps it would be as well to do it for him. Of course, no one wants to harm Mr. Taylor, if he can help it. Oh, no! Not a bit of it."

It was rather a wise conclusion to come to. The gambler was not sure about the one man; but he had his mind made up about the other. If Pony Taylor was killed before he made any allusion to the late trouble it might save him the trouble of attending to his taking off himself.

And the moment Jack Harper saw the sport, he decided the latter must never go out of the Flume alive. If he lingered there after making his escape it must be for the purpose of getting even; and if he was not successful in one way would be apt to try another.

Bedrock, however, was doing his best to draw attention his way.

"Ez a peaceful man, ov pertick'ler principles, it's ag'in' me jin'ral rule ter git inter ary soshul centercourse with folks ez are not ov ther fu'st standin'. They hev brung me nothin' but defekilty an' danger. Most frequent, w'en sich obtrude I pass 'em by with silent sco'n. But this are a leetle too agrevated, an' I will be compelled ter centtle pussional punishment. Ther differen's in our persishuns are too plain ter make yer ackshuns less ner a censult."

"Rats, Mr. Soaker, if that be your name," smiled back Taylor, hardly allowing his eyes to wander in the direction of the tramp.

"As a friend of the proprietor I am not sure but what it is my duty to fire you out without further argument."

So far it was simply a case of chaff. A man like the sport can do such things without exciting more than a momentary surprise that his taste should lie in that direction. It would lie with the man of rags to decide what was to be the outcome.

When such bits of sport begin there is no telling how serious the ending will be. And then, though there was a good deal of license given to patrons of the Flume, the proprietor always stood ready to take a hand in.

Bedrock noted one thing that no one else appeared to. Taylor was thoroughly unconcerned in his bearing, but he was not off his guard, and had detected the appearance of Harper the moment he came on the scene. In the rear of the row of decanters that graced the bar was a broad looking-glass, and Pony could note what was behind him.

"Jest so you follers I'm willin' ter go," bristled up Bedrock. "Ther deegnty ov a-walkin' pheelosofy hev bin insulted, an' satisfackshun are in order. Choose yer weepins, name yer fr'en', an' meet me onther field ov honor. Thar shall no man live ter say he hez beat him out a drink 'thout he kin fu'nish a fun'ral fur ther nex' day."

"Oh, bosh!" laughed Pony.

"Go soak your head; and while you are about it get a little of the mud off your clothes. You know you are nothing but a vile old fraud, and that if you saw a man with a gun coming there would be a right smart chance for a foot-race, with you well in front. Dry up, now, or there will be something that hurts."

Then he suddenly wheeled and faced Jack Harper, who had been softly coming nearer.

Bedrock was too slow. In fact, the gambler began to think he was only holding his man in play till some one should come to take the serious part of the job off his hands.

At the sudden change of front he knew his presence had been noted from the first, though without exactly understanding how, and that it was time for him to come into the game.

"What is going on here?" he asked roughly, staring straight at Taylor.

"Johnny, did these men drink together?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then they are good enough to fight together, and the sooner they step outside and get to work the better it will be for them. I can't have them rowing around in this house. Move, you men, before I have to mop up the floor with you."

"Now ye'r shoutin', me noble lord!" exclaimed Bedrock, flourishing a revolver, and executing a war-dance.

"I bin a-waitin' on him, actooally a-waitin'. Fur fun er dollars I kin take his scalp, an' I bet yer a ten he dassn't foller me."

"Hand me the switch, Johnny," said Harper coldly.

His hand was in his side pocket, and he was ready to shoot the moment Taylor said a word in regard to the game lately played between them, but he caught the club which the bartender tossed to him, and then turned savagely on the tramp.

"You can't play the same game to win twice in this place, my gentle gazelle. I am admitting you are a better man than you look, and so I am going to keep the advantage on you all the time. Git!"

In spite of the ready revolver Harper swung his stick, and advanced a step nearer.

"A moment, Mr. Harper. Perhaps you would like to have a shot at me? I suppose I am [the responsible party in this affair."

"Not in my own house," retorted Jack, as Taylor edged up to thrust himself between the two.

"When gentlemen start a racket here and then try to leave it for me to finish it up I just put them both out, and let them settle their difference in the middle of the street. You better go along with him."

The words were a threat rather than a caution, and Taylor would have answered after his own fashion had not Bedrock taken the chance away from him even before the gambler was done speaking.

"Put me out!" he howled.

"Put Sandy Soakers out! W'y yer can't put one side ov him out—you ner all yer heelers. I'm ready an' a-waitin', w'y don't yer try it on?"

He danced around, swung his pistol in one hand and slapped his thigh with the other, and cared nothing for the fact that three or four handy-looking men were standing near him, their eyes fixed on Harper, waiting for a sign. That it had not been given was something of a wonder.

"Out you go!" suddenly shouted Harper, and he aimed a quick, heavy blow at Pony Taylor, while half a dozen more threw themselves on the two men.

As the blow descended Bedrock swung up his revolver, and fired once, in the direction of Pony Taylor. Then he dodged back directly between the nearest two of the charging heelers.

It looked like a wonderful chance. The bullet hit neither Taylor, nor yet the proprietor of the saloon; but struck the end of the falling club just before it reached the spot where, the previous moment, the head of Pony Taylor had been.

At the same time Harper pulled the trigger of the derringer which lay in his left-hand pocket.

The dodge the sport made carried his head out of the reach of the club, but at the report of the pistols he suddenly clapped his left hand to his side, staggering still further back.

The movement brought him near Bedrock, who had struck out at the two who, confused by his sudden movement, were clawing at the vacant air.

First with the right hand, and then with the left, he threw in his weight, landing his blows at the butt of the ear, and then plunged forward again, throwing up the right hand of Taylor in time to make a bullet waste itself harmlessly on the air.

"Yer hung too long on ther perlim'naries," whispered Primrose, as he clasped the sport around the waist and whirled him around.

"Hyre's ther hull gang on hand, and 'ef we stay we got ter slaughter 'em all, an' that don't suit me. Ef yer love me, leave."

Harper was sure, when he saw the sport clasp his hand to his side, that his shot had gone home, and he saw that by his quick work Primrose had probably saved his life. After that he was willing to allow his henchmen and their allies to finish the work. The only question was whether he should make an effort to save Bedrock.

With a grim smile on his face he stepped back and watched the struggle.

For a dying man Pony Taylor certainly showed he had some wonderful reserves left. After the shots there was a confused medley, some men trying to get forward and others back. There were other shots and shouts, a surging and a swearing, and in the midst of all Taylor and Bedrock hard at work, knocking out a passage to the door.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TAYLOR GETS DOWN TO WORK.

"Dog blast it! Fur ther love ov ole times, cain't ye give me a show? Thar'll be plenty ov time ter git back on him, an' it's life er de'th with me, ter say nothin' ov heaps ov money."

The two were on the street together, and Pony seemed to be hesitating whether to drop into cover and wait for the crowd, or move off without further ceremony.

"Oh, if you put it that way, old man, I suppose I will have to. You stood by me when I had the last racket with Ready Rank, and I suppose I will have to return the compliment, if you are really on the track of something more than fun."

"I've bin a-standin' in with yer ter night, whether it looked so er not; an' when ther lass' round comes I'll be with yer solid. Ontil I struck ther gang I hedn't a idear that thar war big money in it, but puttin' things tergether w'ot I know, an' w'ot I've heard, I kin swar ter it now."

"Then you must be working up one of the junior's cases. He could put it in worse hands. I'll try not to interfere, but don't be too brash about getting in my way. I'd have to down you, for you play mighty reckless when the fit is on you."

"Wish I could 'xplain me game, but it wouldn't work. I cain't sheer even with Pony Taylor. I'm gittin' too old ter hope fur a strike ag'in in ther mines, an' this hyar are me lass' chance. Ef I make ther raffle I'm goin' ter quit ther road, an' go back to ther buzzom ov me fambly. That da'rter are a trump, an' even ther ole lady'd give me a welcome ef I come with a cool hundred thousand more. Now, ef it's all ther same ter you, I'll jest git round this hyer corper an' take a shot at yer back. Ef it comes tolerbul clost don't be afear'd. I kin shoot to a hair, an' you orter know it."

They had been hurrying along since the conversation got started again, and were some little

distance from the Flume. Without giving Taylor time for answer he dodged aside, and by the time Pony looked over his shoulder had disappeared.

"Kind of wearing on the nerves," thought the sport as he pushed on, feeling sure the shot would come, and that it would not go very wild, either.

"The old man is not exactly a lunatic, and yet, there is no telling what he may become, some day. If he happens to go clean off his base right now he might hold a little too straight. Humph!"

He heard a sharp "hist," right at his ear, and the report of a revolver, fired from the distance of not more than a score of yards. The suspense was over, and if he had not known who pulled the trigger he would have thought it was a sure enough thing.

"That settles it. If he has not made himself solid with the gang now he never can. I'll leave the coast clear for him, and turn in for the night. As he would have it, there has been fun enough for one evening. To-morrow I may take it up again where we have left off, unless Jack Harper thinks it is necessary to make a call this evening. I let him down as easily as I could but he may think I will equal about the trap and if he does he will imagine he is bound to kill me. A dollar would I give if I knew what was the real motive for that funny business over the game."

It suddenly occurred to him he had no dollar to give, and that aroused his anger more than the attempts on his life. He walked faster than he had been doing, but in his heart he did not much care whether the pack from the Flume overtook him or not.

It was not altogether to give them the chance, however, that he turned aside from the direct route to the cabin of Mr. Lyon.

If there was a mob following him, or even if Harper should set a couple assassins on his trail, he did not care to lead them directly to the two who had shown themselves his friends.

He was striding along in no good humor with either himself or the rest of the world when a figure seemed to rise from the ground in front of him.

"Mr. Taylor, I believe?" said a voice, that had an inquiring ring to its tone.

"Taylor goes. Not so sure about the mister, though I have had the idea I was a full-fledged man."

He was not sure about the stranger, though his objects appeared pacific, and his size rendered it uncertain whether it was boy or man speaking.

"I am not particularly your friend, but I want to give you a friendly warning. It can do you no harm to listen, even though you do not afterward care to act."

"Drive on, then. You will get the usual amount of thanks for such things, and I will probably do as I please."

"Of course. But as it is a matter which concerns others besides yourself, there is the more reason for my speaking. I understand you intend to leave the Bar as a guide for two persons who are in search of a lost mine, or a missing treasure, or something of that kind."

"Well?"

"I do not ask you if such be the case, but if it is I would advise you to waste no time in preparations, but to go at once."

"Thanks. If I do not, I suppose there are some parties in Mineral Bar who will endeavor to see I do not go at all."

"Wrong, my dear sir. Though they might be willing to kill you off if they had a sudden opportunity, it would not be to prevent your going, but rather from fear you will not start promptly enough."

"And you advise?"

"If it is possible, start at once. By so doing you may throw them off your track altogether. Otherwise, they will be apt to follow you closer than will be convenient, and in case success should crown your efforts, they will be on hand to reap the benefits of it."

"You appear to know a good deal about what will be, or may be, done."

"I know more about it than I desire. I am not sure that I wish to prevent your pursuit, but I would like to save you from harm."

"But if we are missed it would not be much of a task to follow us. Running away from danger is a poor plan. The safest way is to stay until you are certain you are leaving none behind."

"Perhaps, if you got a fair start, things might afterward shape themselves so that the danger of being followed would be the less, and before you were overtaken it would be altogether removed."

"You are speaking in riddles, and I do not care to guess them. I will go when it seems best, if I go at all. Let those who are in the way stand from under."

"Still, the warning cannot have done you any harm, and perhaps you will remember it in time to do you good. Again I say, if you are going, go at once."

"And if I do not?"

"Then look out for your own life, and those who are near you. My belief is that you at least

will be killed, to make room for a less competent man."

"You seem to know a good deal about me."

"More than you think. You are no stranger to some of the men of the Bar, and it may be they have some private grudge to satisfy, which could be better avenged out in the mountains than here, but if there seems to be little chance for that, they would not hesitate try a shot from behind, even in the center of the town."

"Thanks for the warning. A shot of that kind was tried not long ago, but it missed, as you see. They will always miss until the time comes for me to go under, and when that arrives nothing I can do will make any difference. If you have nothing more to say, I will bid you good-evening. I had some of your friends on my trail not long ago; and it is not certain how soon they will put in their appearance again. If they come you might not care to have them see you in conversation with a marked man like myself. So-long!"

Over his shoulder the sport gave a quick glance as he moved away, but found that the individual had already vanished.

"Had the figure of a boy, but the experience of an older head. Wonder why the warning was given? If Lyons was able to mount a horse I don't know but what I would be advising the very thing myself. The longer we loaf around the Bar the bigger will be the following when we do pull out. They are onto his plans here, and when one man starts after hidden treasure, or a lost bonanza, there are always a hundred willing and anxious to follow."

He was too much of a stranger in the town to recognize the person who had taken the trouble to give him the warning. Had he known who he was he might not have been any the more willing to take it, but would have understood better that the individual was talking by card.

In spite of what he had said, the warning, or advice, did make an impression on him. He decided to quit his wandering for the night, and if Lyons was awake when he returned, to tell him of his adventures of the evening.

He walked rapidly in the direction of the cabin.

Now that his attention was turned in that direction it seemed to him he heard the tread of many feet, and caught a glimpse of moving shadows in the distance.

The crowd, if crowd there was, had been moving on a line parallel with that on which he was traveling, and was now some distance ahead of him.

"It is a gang on its way to Lyons's house—are they after me, or is that only to be the excuse? By heavens! There will be some lively times if they dare to cross the threshold while I am at the front. I may be able to head them off if I put on steam."

He lingered no longer, and darted away with his best foot foremost, but he came a trifle late. The crowd had come against the door with a rush forcing it open, and Mr. Lyons, suddenly awakened, but with wits all about him, had lined the leader who stood upon the threshold.

"Put up yer pistol!" the fellow shouted, afraid to advance, but unwilling to retire.

"It's not you we're after; but ther dog-goned gerloot what plugged Jack Harper. Turn him out hyer, an' we'll go on our way, rejoicin'."

"I know nothing about any such man, and my daughter and I are alone in the cabin. If there was such a man here, though, I'd allow myself to be torn in pieces sooner than turn him over to a set of masked cowards who come here to do murder under cover of the night. Leave while you can. Crippled though I am I have still strength to draw trigger, and I never miss my aim."

"Ye'r a stranger hyer, an' dunno who ye'r talkin' to, er you wouldn't crow jest so loud."

"I am glad I do not know. I would want to cut my throat if I thought I had acquaintances such as you. Leave, now! The last time of asking!"

"Don't rub it in too thick, old man. We ain't bed nothin' in fur you, but that ain't sayin' we mayn't hev. We're ther Regulators ov Mineral Bar, an' when we come fur a man he's got ter go. If he's hyer trot him out an' we'll make yer no more trouble. If he ain't hyer we got to be sure ov it."

"That will do. You don't come in here alive, and before we get through the same can be said of more than one of your gang. Get back!"

The fellow at the threshold hesitated. He had no intention of going forward while that weapon covered him; but he did not care to give ground unless he had to. While he parleyed he knew there was a force stealing around to the rear of the house, and that when the attack came from both front and rear, he thought it most likely the man on the bed would surrender.

At this last order, however, he saw there was no time to lose. He then threw himself backward a shade before the explosion came, and at the same time the men at the rear of the house came swarming in. Unless the drop was really on them, they cared little for a single man, even if he did have a pistol.

It was a moment of danger to Mr. Lyons, though he was not thinking of himself. He was expecting to hear a cry from Edna. He did not

believe this attack was made on account of anything done by Pony Taylor, yet he hesitated to shoot against such odds; and while he glared around some one came through the door like a cyclone.

It was only one man, and he against nearly a dozen, but he never hesitated, and had all the advantages of a surprise. Right and left, right and left, he struck off, knocking the men around like tenpins. One or two flew through the rear door before they touched the ground, and in a twinkling there were more black eyes and bloody noses than the Bar had ever seen made up in the same length of time.

In the struggle of half a dozen of the more timid ones to get out of the way the table was overturned, and the lamp extinguished, leaving the fight to go on in the darkness.

Pony Taylor was at the front, and he had everything his own way. Every man he could reach was fair game, and the darkness covered his motions so that no one could locate him. Until he hit it was a mystery where he was; and after that the nearest man was not in condition to locate him.

When he had a little breathing room the sport caught up a chair. He was not altogether reckless. With that article he could do very good work, and keep the crowd at a distance. In spite of the aimless resistance that was made, the result never was in doubt. Some crawled out, some rushed out, and some were put out. The room was cleared as if by magic.

A halt was made at the distance of a few rods from the house, but the party was badly demoralized, and when Pony Taylor stepped out he only had to say a few words to them.

"Gentlemen, my shooting is a good deal better than my fistcuffs. Say the word if you want to have a sample. And if you don't want to say the word, just remain as you are the fraction of a minute, and I open the batteries."

"Not ary in mine!" said Tommy Twofeet, and he led the way in the general scramble from the spot.

CHAPTER XXV.

BEDROCK TELLS THE NEWS.

"THEY are evidently in earnest about downing me," said Taylor, as he re-entered the cabin.

"From the little I heard I believe that was their excuse for the intrusion."

"I should have shot sooner," lamented Lyons, who had been really both prudent and brave.

"But I knew if they were not the most cowardly brutes in the world, I could not hope to beat them off without more slaughter than I could make, crippled as I was. Where is Edna?"

"Here, father!"

To the surprise of both she entered, not from the other room, but through the open door. While the struggle had been going on she was not in the house at all.

"Ah, if I had only known!" was the exclamation of her father.

"I feared for you, and it took away my courage. You would have taken care of yourself, as I should have known."

"Don't trouble yourself about lost opportunities," interposed the sport. "You will certainly have plenty more of them if you remain long in this place. We are evidently marked men. I have been playing light with the wretches, but it seems to be mercy thrown away."

"Yes. And yet, to begin slaughter might only make the matter worse in the end," responded Edna, with a shiver.

"I begin to think the advice I received a bit ago was worth the listening to. Some one whom I never saw before told me that for the sake of our own safety it would be well for us to leave the place at once. I put on the high and mighty style, but I did not mean much of what I said; and now I cannot say I mean any of it."

"Ah!" said Taylor, hastily.

"Just such advice was given to me. Perhaps I laughed at it a little too soon."

"It is certain," continued Edna, "that we are the objects of a great deal of attention. If what I overheard is to go for anything we are spied upon more closely than we have imagined."

"Foolish girl! What have you been doing?"

Mr. Lyons raised himself up again in some excitement. He knew his daughter had once more taken risks that were at least unwise, and to do so had to a certain extent deceived him.

"Not hard to guess," she answered, turning to the sport.

"You must know I was doing some scouting earlier in the evening, and through a window at the Flume saw you tumbled into the cellar. I was discovered, and some danger was near me for a time, but I escaped. I could not rest, however, until I knew what had been your fate, and was going to see, a short while ago, when I met my would-be mentor. Then, I heard steps in the darkness, that came near to where I was crouching; and a low conversation, intended to be heard by no others than the two who carried it on."

"And who were the men?"

"That I do not know, but one of them was cautioning the other to keep his eyes open for a

map such as you drew to-day. It may have been that to find it was the principal object of the attack. If so they will come again, if with a different excuse. Would that we could leave here."

Mr. Lyons appeared to be deeply moved by her words, and spoke promptly:

"And we will—if it is only to hide ourselves in the wilderness until we can get to our work with the strength needed for it. I have been half expecting some such emergency as this, and am not unprepared for it."

But, Taylor was not satisfied.

"If you are in earnest I am afraid I shall have to put the brakes on. I don't mind running away when there is anything to be made by it, but you are not in shape for the journey. Perhaps we can make the fight better here than in the regions you wish to visit?" he suggested.

"Never trouble yourself about me. I may be a burden, but will not be altogether helpless. If you fear the risks, say so, and retire. I have no claim on you. Edna and I can go by ourselves."

Taylor smiled.

"With those who know me I have the reputation of personally fearing nothing. It is for your daughter I have fears, if for any one. Make up your mind as seems best, and wherever and whenever you want me you will find me around. I would liked to have finished the little game begun with the proprietor of the Flume, but that can keep. As you know, I am without means of my own, but if you choose to furnish the transportation, Pony Taylor will furnish his proportion of the procession."

"The means will be furnished, and we—"

He ceased speaking because the sport suddenly darted from the room. He had not seemed to be noticing anything without, but for some little time had thought there was an unseen listener. Now, he was about sure of it. As he came rushing out he could hear footsteps crashing away in the darkness.

He was a fleet runner, but the man held his own, though there was a glimpse of him in the distance.

"I may be wrong," thought Taylor, as he turned back; "but it looked to me very much like old Bedrock himself. If he is playing a straight game what was he spying around there for? It would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer to decide on the evidence whether the old vagabond is to be trusted."

If Taylor had followed him, it would have required all the remembrance he had of past services to retain his confidence in the tramp.

Bedrock it was, and he had overheard the conversation up to the point when the sharp ears of the sport had discovered his presence.

He was entitled to a certain amount of credit, however. He had not come out with the gang who claimed to be in pursuit of Taylor, though he had followed in its wake for a time, and then constituted himself an unseen guard over the brave hearted Edna.

When she entered the house he crept nearer.

When he retreated he knew the risks he was running, but made no effort to hide himself after he had once got beyond easy shooting range. From time to time he glanced back over his shoulder, until he saw that Pony had given over the chase; then moderated his pace.

"He orter onderstan', arter ther hint I give him, thet things can't allers be jest w'ot they seem, an' thet ole Bedrock are playin' it fine on everybody but him. He orter give me a show, he reely orter. Ef he don't, so much ther, wuss fur him! Now, ef I could on'y see ther chaine ter peddle me infurmashun things 'd be right on er string like inyons."

The chance came sooner than he expected.

He made his way to the neighborhood of the Flume, only to come suddenly upon a man whom he did not recognize, but who evidently knew him, and had something to say to him.

"This way, old man. There is something you may as well hear now as at some other time. It would have been all the better if I had been ready to say it sooner. Might have saved a mix."

"Gimme yer han' fur thirty days. Thar's nothin' I like ter hear better ner the honest coufesshun, w'ot's good fur ther soul. Speak it out, sweetly an' 'sirene. It'll make me feel better than ef I hed a dish er buckwheat cakes an' honey."

"You were on trial to-night, and went through nobly. Most men would have felt like throwing off under such circumstances, but you stuck to your game. It may be the rest was a mistake on your part, but after saving Jack Harper's life, as you certainly did, no one can doubt your good intentions."

"That's prezactly w'ot all ez knows me allers sed. 'He's a man ov 'stinguished looks, oner-dulterated sand, an' wisdom 'bout eend. W'en he puts out his paw, yer got a man ter tie to."

"No doubt, no doubt! The on'y objection I have found is, you do not wait for orders, but try to run things on your own idea. After this, things will be different. You will understand what you have to do, and confine yourself to orders."

"All right, boss. I war jest showin' ov me style w'en I war goin' it erlone. But, put a

stiddy han' on ther bit and ther ole war-hoss kin prance ter some pu'p'pose."

"Very well. Mineral Bar is a hard town, and we who run the camp can do a hard business, but it will not do to take too many risks. As long as Taylor keeps his mouth shut, we will have to let him alone until he opens up a fresh chance. Shooting at him on the street may not be altogether a safe amusement. He is sport from the ground up, and if you only give him rope for awhile, he will be sure to hang himself in the end."

"I dunno ez I onderstand yer game, an' I dunno ez it's nessysary that I sh'ud; but it won't do ter make him rope too long, fur he's goin' ter skip ther camp. I didn't jest gitter ther bottom ov ther plan, 'case they smoked me out too soon, but fur a guess, I sh'ud say it'd be mighty sudden—perhaps atwixt now an' mornin'."

"Sure?"

"That war ther way they laid it down. Ole man Lyons hez got skeered ov ther town; an' the sport, he's a-goin' along."

"That is sudden notice, but—how would you like to go with them?"

"Er jest behind 'em, eh?"

"Well, yes—just behind till we find where they are going to."

"Gimme a hoss an' I kin keep up with ther gang."

"And if there is red work to be done at the end of the trail?"

"Sandy Soakers won't squeal."

"Enough! We will need you. Get back as quietly as you can, and watch their movements. If they leave the camp to-night, some one will be on their trail hard to shake off. Go, at once. I will send you your orders later on. Just now, I must see about sending the news."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SUNKEN RIVER.

DOWN deep in the canyon there was a little thread of water, hard to reach, but none the less sweet for that, you may be sure.

On the bank above were camped two men and a woman. The party consisted of Mr. Lyons, his daughter Edna, and Pony Taylor.

The day had been luridly hot, and the tired horses stood waiting eagerly for their rations.

It was slow work, toiling upward with water in the canvas buckets, and Taylor would have been glad enough to rest first, even on the baked ground, which was still as hot as the floor of an oven.

But the horses had to be cared for, to say nothing of Edna and her father. The work of this, and several preceding days, had been hard enough, but there was no certainty worse was not to come. It was altogether the best plan to look after food and water first. After that, if there was still opportunity, rest would seem doubly sweet.

The camp had its disadvantages; but there was not a better and safer site within twenty-five miles—perhaps fifty. The chances were that another night, if they moved forward, would find them in one which was worse.

There was water here, though hard to get; and there were scattered bunches of grass, with here and there a scrubby tree, the branches of which might eke out the slender provender for the horses.

With a dripping bucket in either hand, Taylor looked around him, and expressed himself as well satisfied.

"Well satisfied!" exclaimed Edna. "What would it take to make you anything else?"

Taylor smiled. He was not surprised that the journey, with its trouble and terrors, had been wearing on the young lady. He would have answered lightly had not Mr. Lyons spoken promptly:

"Satisfaction is only a relative term. We might be in more comfortable quarters; but we are still in the land of the living, and have our scalps on. What more could we ask?"

"I would ask a great deal more if it was any use. Most of all, I would like to be three thousand miles away from here, with the work now before us all completed. Failing that, I would like to be sure we know where we are, and that we have not lost our way in this trackless country, where one point of the compass seems exactly like the rest."

"Thanks for the confidence displayed in the undersigned," laughed the young man, touching his hat lightly.

"But, tell the truth, if you please: Have you the least idea where we really are?"

"With all due deference to the fallibility of mankind as exemplified in guides, and such like, I should say, I have."

"Then, I beg your pardon for the doubt. The way we were winding in and out, and going back almost in our very tracks—as we have been doing for the greater part of the day—I fancied it looked much as though we were groping in the dark."

"Quite a natural conclusion, though I had little idea you were such a close observer. There were reasons for so doing, though I did not care to mention them for fear of giving unnecessary alarm."

"The suspense is worse than the alarm—though the reason ought to be guessed."

"Yes. You can imagine what I have to tell you for there could be but one thing to apprehend. Since yesterday we have been followed."

"By whom?"

"That is to find out; though I suppose it must be our friends from the Bar."

"And are they near us now?"

"Whether the party has been thrown off the track remains to be seen. I suppose it depends a good deal upon the course we were expected to take. What that was I have been only able to hazard a guess. By this time to-morrow we will know."

"Those of us who are living, I suppose you mean."

"Truly, a good proviso. I have found life here to be very uncertain. Yet, I do not think we are in any danger from those behind if they overtake us—not now, at least. They are anxious to keep us in view; and I to drop them. Meantime, I am responsible for this outfit, and I think I am equal to the occasion."

Mr. Lyons, after his one interruption, listened quietly to the conversation. He looked somewhat the worse for wear, yet he had been standing the journey far better than Taylor had thought possible when it was begun. It was sheer good luck that had helped him through, for the chances were a hundred to one he would injure his arm the first day in the saddle.

Instead of that, the arm was giving him no trouble at all; and he began to think of the not very distant time when it could be taken out of the sling altogether.

He came forward again to have his share in the talk.

"Of course, we ran the chances of being followed, and we must meet the situation the best way we can. If they drive us off of our course we must make a circuit and return to it when it is safer."

Taylor became more communicative.

"So far, they have not driven us very far. The water below us is the stream I have called the Sunken River. It is almost lost now, as you can see. A dozen miles from here it is gone altogether."

"Then we are nearing the locality we set out to explore?"

"We are already there. If I am not mistaken this section of the country is pictured on the other section of the map which you suppose is in the hands of the enemy. I would not have stopped here if it could have been avoided, but the spot of refuge—an old relic of the cave-dwellers—for which I am aiming is too far away to reach to-day. Let us hope we can make it to-morrow without being tracked. After that we can afford to rest."

Darkness was beginning to come down upon them, and for the present the conversation ceased. There was no need to build a camp-fire, and but little more could be done by them, for the horses which had carried them faithfully over many miles. They seated themselves and made a meal of a frugal kind with scarcely another word.

Camping out in such a spot had its disadvantages, but father and daughter made the best of the situation, and, leaving to Pony Taylor the duty of keeping guard during the first part of the night, it was not long before the two were asleep.

For some time Taylor lounged around the spot, not altogether easy in his mind, yet uncertain what danger there could be to fear. He was as well convinced as could be that the party in pursuit—of which he had obtained but a single, uncertain glimpse—could not have headed them off.

From the rear he anticipated no immediate danger.

For some time they had been making their way along the edge of the canyon, by a narrow trail, known to but few. The canyon on the one side, and the overhanging rocks on the other, protected their flanks. They were now encamped near the entrance to a small pocket, chosen as a spot susceptible of easy defense, and Pony Taylor felt sure one man could here hold half a dozen at bay.

Since they had fairly started the young man's respect for his employer had been rising.

Though Mr. Lyons knew little about this region, there was very little of the tenderfoot about him. He had plenty of courage, and Pony shrewdly suspected that if it came to a test it would be found that experience was not altogether lacking. With but one arm that could be used the elder gentleman was not to be considered a mere cipher for fighting purposes.

Taylor had been thinking over these things, and yet he was not altogether satisfied.

"It was a foolish bit of business, this, after all. After the taste we had of them there is no mistake but what the bad men of Mineral Bar were ready for almost anything, and there was danger for them while they lived in that shanty, where they could be wiped out before the rest of the town knew what was going on. But, the old man has plenty of money for present expenses, and I ought to have made him move his quarters. At the hotel they would have been safe enough till that bone was knit."

"Or if it seemed to him that the Bar was no longer safe for him he has moved in the wrong direction. Over at the Gulch he might have got up an outfit that he could have relied on to see him through. If anything should happen to me what would become of the two?"

The question was a serious one—more serious than Pony Taylor was in the habit of asking himself.

He was not given to airing his courage; but as a general thing went straight ahead, wherever the notion took him, without considering the odds. He recognized the fact, and gave a short laugh.

"Ha, ha! I must be a little harder hit than I could have thought possible in so short a time. Couldn't resist the temptation to pose as something of a hero, and to earn her everlasting gratitude by doing the impossible! If I had been flush, now, I would no doubt have tried a more sensible plan; but with empty pockets, and no chance to make a strike in the camp, if I stayed there was nothing for me to do but get a shot at Gentleman Jack, and then starve."

"That was the reason, I suppose, I was willing to find the bonanza first, and then go back to investigate this doctor, though I do not yet understand what Lyons means to do with him if he should turn out to be the individual who killed Paul Prindle. Does he want to have him hung, or to execute him without benefit of judge or jury? I think I will have to ask him. He has told a mighty indefinite story, and there may be some more points I ought to know."

He looked toward the sleepers, and then rose to his feet and slowly strolled away along the trail by which they had reached the spot.

He had been on the lookout during all of his unspoken soliloquy; and did not think there was any danger near; but he cared not to continue the line of thought he could see was opening up.

In the gorge everything was darkness to the ordinary eye. There was danger, while wandering, of a tumble into the canyon of the Sunken River, and he could hardly expect to meet with any one. Unless those in pursuit were very certain of their quarry, they would not be apt to enter such a trap in the darkness that had rapidly gathered over the spot.

Taylor was not off his guard, however. He advanced cautiously, pausing now and then to listen. The very fact that he was nervous and uneasy seemed to be proof there was some one near; and the further he went the more he became convinced. There was no one to notice his caution, but if there had been, he would not have been ashamed of it.

After a little he heard a faint, but suspicious sound, and dropped at once to his knees. By daylight he would not have heard it, but at night even the turning of a pebble would reach his ears.

Though he remained motionless for several minutes, no such sound was repeated, and he again advanced, this time on his hands and knees. By looking upward he could make sure nothing would flit by him in the trail.

His precautions were thorough, as he thought, and he was bent on finding out what had turned the pebble. He did not make sufficient allowance for the fact that another man might be playing the same game.

Suddenly, his head came squarely against that of a man who was advancing in the same manner!

CHAPTER XXVII.

CAGED IF NOT CAUGHT.

COMPLETE though the surprise might be it did not take Pony Taylor off his guard.

Throwing his weight entirely on his knees, with a movement like a flash he thrust out his left hand and caught the throat of the intruder, while with his right he threw forward his pistol, just in time to have the fingers of the other man close upon his wrist.

"Stiddy, Pony, stiddy! It's on'y me—yer blamed ole rickety, rackety, Ragged Rufe. I thort it war time ter hev a bit ov chin-chin, an' so war jest makin' a call."

"And a mighty close call it was, for you, old man! I think if I had not recognized the feel of those pudgy fingers I would have had the top of your head off by this time. In the name of common sense, what did you mean coming for the camp after this style?"

"Common sense an' yer Uncle Bedrock ain't got much ter do with each other," was the reply, still in a guarded whisper. "Ef they hed be'd be snoozin' in camp 'stead ov reeskin' his life a-crawlin' 'round ther camp ov Pony Taylor."

"All right; take your time to it," said Taylor, resignedly. "You have to beat around the bush just so long before you will begin to talk business. Beat away! When you get down to the kernel I'll be listening. Meantime, you couldn't keep a watch out while I do some of that snoozing you speak of? If you don't want it I do."

"Don't snore!" chuckled Bedrock, as Pony threw himself back, with his shoulders against a convenient rock, and composed himself for slumber.

"You got one ag'in' ther ole man, this round."

"But, I ain't got space ter tarry. I didn't reckon you'd be taken off guard, but I hed a word ov warnin' fur yer perivate ear. You mind w'ot I tole yer, back et ther Bar, 'bout Ready Rank?"

"I seldom forget."

"I on'y hed a glimmerin' idear ov ther facks; but sence then thar's clearder light on ther subject. Things is workin' all right fur me; but they ain't jest so sirene fur Pony Taylor, onless he knows how ther land lays."

"What has that to do with Ready Rank?"

"Heap sight, ez you'll be willin' ter admit when I tell yer he are camped right down on yer trail now, an' warn't fur off'n it at ther Bar."

The confident way in which the old man spoke had its effect. Pony was thoughtful for a moment—the more so because Bedrock was preternaturally quiet, allowing time, as he said to himself, for his information to soak in.

When he spoke it was slowly, and as though trying to weigh the intelligence he had heard as he went along.

"Thanks, old man. It was worth some risks on my part to know that much, and here you have been taking them off my shoulders. Needn't tell you, after what you know of the trouble once between us, that he has no love for me. He would mean murder, pure and simple, if he once got the chance."

"Aggeravative murder, ef w'ot he sez kin be b'lieved. You kin figger it up w'ether it's best ter keep outen his way, er ter hev it out with him on sight. He bez six ter back him, not countin' a jim-dandy ov a leetle pard, er yer 'umble servant. I reckon they count on seein' whar yer goin' afore they show ther hands; but when I tole 'em you war startin' out on this trail it jest tickled 'em all over."

"Only six, you say?"

Though Primrose had just confessed to having put the pursuers on the track, Taylor paid no attention to the fact. He was thinking of the odds against him.

"Six asides me an' ther leetle pard ez are second in command. Concernin' Bedrock thar ain't no need ter say a word. He's a holy terror, frum headwaters; but about thet leetle side-pard it ain't so easy ter post yer. Hez a eye like a hawk, an' nerve by ther bucket; but I ain't sure he ain't got er leetle game ov his own."

"No mistake about Rank, I suppose. If my memory don't fail me you have almost as much to fear from him as I. You stood him off while I got ready for work, and the rustler seldom forgets, if all I have heard is true."

"Nary mistake. He fooled me fur a bit; but I'm countin' on it thet I fool him all ther time. One tramp are purty much ov a muchness with er another, an' w'en Billy rung me in with ther head center ov ther gang, I jest done ther han'sum, tell he thort I war his best frien's'long ez I could depend on coin fur wages."

"Well, as far as anything goes which I can see to the contrary, you may be. You have put him on the trail, and I do not know what end of his you may not be trying to further by your visit here. I don't trust you any too much, for what you have told me cannot barm him much, nor do me any good. I have really an idea it would be good policy to take you into camp and keep you there."

"That's ther way it looks; that's ther way it looks! But Uncle Bedrock are wu'kin' fur hisself fu'st, lass' an' all ther time. When I struck ther Bar, an' got in with Johnny Harper, Doc Rice, Billy Barton, an' that gang, I tho't it war goin' ter be fun amazin', an' nothin' more. But when me eyes war once opened I see it war pure bizzness, an' nothin' else. Say! you recomember ther 'On'nable Lewis Stafford?"

"Certainly."

"An' are his word good fur a cold hundred thousand?"

"I would take it for that and not offer my chances cheap."

"That it are, then. That's w'ot's ther matter. I'm keepin' an eye on Rank sence I found him, an' w'en I git ther cinch on I reckon I'll corral thet leetle amount, an' retire from ther life ov a vagabond. It bez its al'uremints, sich ez kin be found nowhar else; but I hev a fambly ter consider, and ef this thing pans out well I'm off fur Noo Yawk, ter set up fur a millyunaire."

"Perhaps I believe you, old man, and if I can do anything to help you it will be done. But if you have any particular use for the king-pin of the rustlers, keep him out of the way. When we meet one of us will have to drop, and I will try my best to see that the man who falls will not be Pony Taylor."

"That's w'ot I war thinkin', an' I jest dropped in ter ax yer ter let him down easy, like, ef it war in ther keyards. Ef I ain't done ther trick afore, he mout be willin' ter make a lass' dyin' confeshun, yer know."

"Where are they now?"

The sudden question did not disconcert the old shadower.

"Lookin' fur me, I reckon. I crawled down inter ther kenyon, ter look fur sign, an' ef they'll b'lieve me, I must 'a' loss' me way. Ef I git back afore mornin', it'll do good ernuf. Don't be skeered w'en I tell yer ye can't drop 'em. You jest go straight ahead an' show ther ole man whar ter fine ther hidden bonanzer. Thar

won't be no fou't tell after that, an' ther sooner it comes off, ther better."

"And supposing something happens to throw Miss Lyons—the young lady with us—into their hands, what is to become of her?"

"Act'ooally speakin', I dunno. Ef Ready Rank are up to his rep'ytashun, it mout be on-plesant. But then, ag'in, it looks to me ez ef Billy Barton'd take keer ov her. He ain't much more ner a boy, an' bez touches ov softness 'round ther heart when yer counts in a female wooman; but he kin hev a heap ter say fur himself; an' w'en lip won't do, he are jest ez bandy with a weepin. Oh, I guess she'll git out all right, howsomedever things may turn fur us."

More was said, though on much the same lines; for Bedrock could be charmingly indefinite when he desired, and it was plain he did not care to do more than put Taylor on his guard.

The sport knew that it might be an advantage to have a friend in the camp of the enemy, and that there was no use to try to interfere with the peculiar methods of the tramp.

In the end the latter crept away as silently as he had come, leaving abundant food for reflection behind him.

One caution Taylor had given him: that it would be best for him not to try to invade the camp again in the same manner. Friend or foe would be apt to meet with the same reception, and that at the muzzle of a revolver.

"Just as big a fool as ever; and just as liable to come out on the top of the heap," thought Taylor, as he watched, and listened in vain to catch the sound of retreating footsteps.

"He would not say anything definite to save his life; and if one could believe his words, he would as soon as not lead the rustler to the attack, if any leading was necessary. If he had explained how Ready Rank came to be on hand on the trail, I would have forgiven him the rest. The old fraud never would crawl twenty miles through the dangers of the darkness, and if not, then the gang is nearer than he was willing to admit. I wonder if it would not be better to locate them now, than to wait for them to locate us. Where would they be apt to camp?"

If Uncle Bedrock could be believed, and if his hint had not been misunderstood, the man he had called Ready Rank was on the trail, or so near it, that when morning came all he had to do was to follow the lay of the land, and the one practicable path would bring him right along in the wake of the fugitives.

For fugitives they were, at the present, even though Taylor, since he knew the force against him, would not have hesitated to stay and fight it out with the rustler captain, had it not been the thought of the danger to those whom he had undertaken to guide.

"If only Lyons was better able to take care of her," was his thought.

"I wouldn't care where they were camped, or what way they chose to come at me; but it won't do to take too many risks. If I sent them on ahead, and laid back to fight it out with the gang, the chances are I would come out all right; but supposing something did happen—where would she be?"

While he hesitated the minutes were slipping away, and there was no doubt but that Bedrock was going with them. He looked back over his shoulder as though it was possible to see his companions; and then ahead, where the trail lay as dark.

"There is one spot where they might have tied up for the night. I thought some of stopping there myself. It means a good five miles there and as many back, and perhaps nothing to be made by it when I get there, but I believe I will try it. Lyons will hardly miss me, and any danger to them will have to pass me on the road. I must know if Rank is really in this thing, and who he has behind him, if it is in the wood to find out."

For a while his progress was slow.

He had to guard against overrunning Primrose, and the way at best was none too safe for one walking in the darkness, unless he kept close to the rocks upon the left. It would not require much of a mistake in the bearing to go crashing down into the canyon.

After a while, however, the way grew plainer. The late-risen moon shed its light more and more upon the trail, and Taylor was able to advance with something of freedom in his step. The distance dropped away behind him, and before the second hour was half up he knew he was in the neighborhood of the spot for which he had been aiming.

After that he became cautious once more, and advanced foot by foot. He felt sure he could approach the camp without discovery; and so far as the men were concerned he might have succeeded; but, as he groped his way along he was startled by the sudden snort of a horse, which had been lying almost in his path, but which now sprang to its feet without much attention to the hopple by which it was kept from wandering.

At once he heard from the darkness beyond a voice, which he recognized as that of Ready Rank himself:

"Stir a foot and I'll drill you! Hands up, and speak quick. Who are you?"

"It's on'y Sandy, jest riddy ter drop. Ef yer waits a minnit you won't hev ter pull trigger. I'm clean did up, but I've got big news. Let up on it, yer royal highness, tell I kin give yer ther p'int. Then, ef yer say so I kin die happy."

The voice that answered was that of Uncle Bedrock. He rose from the ground not a dozen yards away from Taylor; and the latter as silently as he could sunk to the earth.

"Step out, then, with your hands well up, till I see you are coming along. I thought your confounded neck was broken, or you had given us the slip and gone back to more comfortable quarters."

"Notter bit ov it. When me holt slipped I went over inter ther drink, but, Sandy Soakers ain't the man ter be killed that way. I wag-goned along down stream tell I thort I'd never git out tell I come ter Chiny, but I got here all ther same, an' bring news by ther cord. We got 'em on ther hip. They're camped mebbe five mile on, with you on one eend, rocks on one side, ther kenyon on 'nother, an' a lan'slide thet sbets up ther trail on ther fur other eend. They cain't git out."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

SOMETHING very like a thrill ran through Pony Taylor's frame as he heard the assertion of the man of rags, albeit he was an individual not generally given to thrills.

Was it possible Uncle Bedrock was correct as to the stoppage of the trail beyond the spot where they had camped for the night? If so, they were caged indeed—and he knew that Ragged Rufe, whatever his folly at odd times, generally spoke by card when it came to matters of fact like this.

Did Bedrock know of his presence there? and had he uttered these words as a warning? and why had he not given it before? Or, was he playing a double game, and actually willing to sell out the little party, if necessary to do so, to accomplish his ends? He listened to hear further, though his first thought was to go back to warn Mr. Lyons.

"Good enough, old man, if the news you bring will do to swear by. You're sure you ain't off on that slide? because, if you're not it's worth an extra hundred. For a man of your looks you seem to be about the most valuable tramp that ever wore out shoe-leather."

Rank had dropped the muzzle of his pistol, and Bedrock came swaggering up.

"Oh, I knowed we had 'em, jest ez soon ez they turned inter ther flume hyer; but I warn't a-runnin' things, an' laid low tell I war sure me eyes warn't deceivin' ov me. Ef they hed gone on a mile fuder they'd a found it out thei'selves; but they'll know it in ther mornin', onless ye makes up yer mind ter gether 'em in ter-night."

"Ob, I'm not in a hurry to gather them in, till they get to the end of their journey. We have them headed off from the spot I was afraid they were striking for, and sooner than stop the fun I would haul off and give them a chance to back out of the trap. It goes against the grain to wait; but there may be coin in it."

"But, bless yer soul! Yer don't say that arter all this hyer trouble you ain't goin' ter scoop 'em in?"

"Not just now, Sandy; not just now, unless I change my mind. I have a settlement to make with Pony Taylor, and I'll get it done in good time, if I have to hire a gang of Apaches to burn him at the stake; but first, he can do a bit of work for his adoring friends. Without him the old man wouldn't know which way to turn, and the girl would be a grandmother before Paul Prindle's mine would do her any good."

"I kin see ther game; but Pony ain't ther man ter take many reeks with, ef I'm ter jedge frum ther way he handled hisself back at ther Bar. I've heered 'sider'ble 'bout a map. Ef you jest kin kerrel that, maybe ole Sandy could lead yer to ther rocks ez well ez Pony Taylor."

"I don't know that I have asked for your advice; but if you want to sling it my way I might as well listen to it. You think, then?"

"Sock it to 'em while yer hez ther chance. Ef yer gits ther sport ther ole man 'll be willin' ter trade all he knows, an' ef you can't see through his millstone let Sandy hev a squint. Betcher sweet life he'll find ther hole yer kin see through ter w'ot's on t'other side."

"You think? I guess we will have to hear what Billy has to say on the subject. It's not often he tries to give a lead, but when he does his mouth drops words of wisdom."

"It's Ready Rank, sure enough," thought Taylor, as he listened; "but he has changed some in the last year. He's not half as reckless, though he may be just as wicked. If I could only get a glimpse of this Billy Barton I would be the better able to size up the outfit. The rest of the flock can't have much force when left to themselves."

But there was no chance to see what the little pard looked like.

There was a dim outline of several figures visible, as they stood together conversing, but even the ponderous frame of old Bedrock might have

belonged to any other man, so far as any distinguishing features could be made out.

Barton was there, too; but was slow to speak.

When he did it was in a low whisper which showed how cautious the man could be when the occasion warranted.

"I haven't been taking much stock in this thing, and you ought to know it; but if there is anything in the map, Sandy is not far wrong. Take them while you have them. It may save two or three lives in the end, and the less corpses there are lying around when we go off the trail the better."

"All right, my son. We have till daylight to think the matter over. It won't do to try to stampede the camp in the dark, for if I know the man—and I ought to—that's what he is waiting for; and might be anxious for us to try to make the rifle. If we do, map or no map, gold or no gold, just remember, Pony Taylor is my meat. I have been waiting for a year to have him come my way, and I'd lose every ounce Paul Prindle ever found sooner than have him get away now."

"If you can get him, take him; but I wouldn't have been wasting all this time. A shot in the back would have dropped him, and the thing would have been done. If you hang too long on your aim you may miss altogether."

"I want to use him first; but for all the coin I could carry I would not let him off that easy. Curse him! When he does pass up the range I'll see that the sharp stones cut his bare feet at every step, and that he drinks sorrow with every foot of the ground he goes over."

"Have it to suit yourself. When a man feels that way I have generally noticed he can't do himself justice, and if he has no friends to look after him he most often comes out at the little end of the horn. I'll do the best I can to see you don't drop the Paul Prindle legacy into the grave along with Pony Taylor, but I would a good deal rather you had less feeling in the matter. It makes it dangerous for all of us."

"And if I were you, I wouldn't raise my voice quite so high. There is no telling who may be within long range, and if Taylor is the man you say he is, he may be nearer than we think."

"No danger of that. He might be willing to pump lead our way if he could hear the little game as it is being set up; but Sele would have nosed him out before this, if he was on hand. For horse sense equal to about four men, Sele takes the bun."

Rank had recovered his coolness, which had been momentarily lost when thinking of the hate he bore to the unseen listener. He spoke with a laugh, even, and looked over at the horse which had already put him once on guard, not knowing that Bedrock had appropriated to himself the warning given of the presence of Taylor.

There seemed to be nothing more to learn, and Pony saw it was about time to think of making his retreat. Selim might take a notion to show his intelligence at any moment; and when the men began to talk about interlopers they might end by hunting for them.

Carefully he began to back away from the spot.

His progress was slow; but it was sure. No rolling stone made the slightest noise under his feet, and before many moments he thought it safe to assume an upright position and hasten back to his camp. Whether it would be well to warn Mr. Lyons of the state of affairs he had not as yet decided.

Now that there was no need to fear overrunning Bedrock, or tumbling into the camp of the enemy, it was easier to go at a rapid pace, and Taylor was not more than half as long returning to his camp as he had been getting away from it. He advanced cautiously, for he expected that Mr. Lyons was still asleep, and did not care to waken him or Edna. It still lacked an hour or so of daybreak.

No one challenged him as he stole around the opening of the pocket, and the place somehow seemed to have a deserted feeling, which he noted the moment he reached it.

"Something queer about this," he muttered, as he moved over toward the spot where Lyons and Edna had thrown themselves down on their blankets.

"I can't even hear the sound of their breathing—and a tired man, and a sleeping man, is apt to sound his bugle, whether he knows it or not. What has happened?"

There was no answer to the question though he spoke it aloud. When he looked closer he found they had utterly disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PONY TAYLOR TAKES THE CHUTE.

IN the two or three hours which had elapsed since Taylor followed Uncle Bedrock from the camp there was time for a good deal to happen.

Taylor had felt perfectly safe in leaving the spot unguarded, since he would be traveling toward the only foes that, so far as he knew or believed, could be in the neighborhood.

The pursuing party from the Bar was following; and it was not likely that any roving party would be traveling at that time of night, to come in from the other side.

He looked around carefully, but the pocket

was too dark to see anything clearly, and he knew there was no risk in starting a little flame.

At least he thought he did, though he was not certain of anything just then.

The two were gone, and so were their blankets and other belongings that were portable; but the horses were where he had left them; only they were loosened, so as to be free to wander away if they took a notion.

"What in the name of heaven is the meaning of it all?" was the question he asked himself when he became satisfied there were no traces of how and whither they went.

"There has been nothing of a fight, nothing of an alarm, but they appear to have just naturally flown away. They certainly did not follow me; and if they have gone on in the darkness they must have tested the truth of Bedrock's story by this time. I don't think the man would deliberately give me the cold shake, but if he has done it I want to know as soon as possible. There seems to have been only one way they could have gone, and I may as well follow."

There was no delay after once making up his mind. He gathered up the three horses, mounting his own, and leading the other two, and set out.

In perhaps a little less than half an hour he began to look around for traces of the landslide—and found them right in his front. Bedrock had described the situation exactly. Further advance along the trail he had expected to follow was entirely barred.

"They didn't go further and they didn't go up—what's the matter with their having gone down? Pity I didn't think of it before I fooled away all this time. Something frightened them off and they stumbled down the side of the canyon as they saw me do. Gracious heavens! They may both be lying there dead."

The descent to the bed of the Sunken River was no trifle to accomplish in the darkness, and Taylor had made it at what he thought was the one practicable place—even if Bedrock had found another.

He wasted no time in experiments, but hurried back to the site of the camp. There was no telling when he would return, if ever, and acting as Lyons had done he turned the horses adrift again, and cautiously began the descent.

He reached the bottom without mishap, and then slowly followed the course of the stream, having first satisfied himself there were no dead bodies lying around loose at the foot of the canyon wall.

His progress was tediously slow, and at many risks, and with some rubs.

Now and then he stumbled over a rock which lay in his way; several times his feet slipped or sunk, and he had hard work to save himself from falling headlong into the narrow stream. As he went along he from time to time called cautiously the name of Mr. Lyons.

Although it looked like deliberate desertion he knew what strange panics will sometimes happen. It might be that father and daughter would hail his coming gladly.

"No use to go another foot till daybreak," he said at length, after he had wandered on for what seemed to him to be a terrible time.

"If they skeddaddled on their own account they never got further than this; and if they were carried off I want to go a little slow. From the looks of what I can see of the sky above it must be the dark hour before dawn, and I may as well tie up till I can see what I am doing. From the sound of the water I take it there must be a drop somewhere about here, and the way on this side is getting mighty rough. Perhaps I had better try the other."

The stream was no great depth or width, and though he had managed to keep on the narrow beach all the way along he had no fear of the channel. Without another thought he turned to the left, raised his foot cautiously and held it for a moment over nothingness.

Then, his foot slipped; he gave a short, gruff exclamation—and was swallowed up by the opening in front of him.

There was a short struggle, ended almost as soon as it was begun, as his fingers slipped away from the rocks he tried to grasp in passing, and then he dropped downward.

The water ran on as before, with a low, gurgling splash, and save for that for a moment all was silence in the canyon.

Then a coarse voice, with something of a shiver in it, muttered:

"Blamed if ther gerloot ain't took the shute! Say nothin' 'bout it, but we needn't be a-worry-in' over him."

Nevertheless, two men crept out of the darker darkness, where they had been concealed, and peered anxiously downward.

Knowing what it was they were looking for they had little difficulty in making out the yawning hole, into which tumbled the water of the Sunken River.

"I tell yer, Bitters, ther chap knowed ther lay ov the land onct on a time, but he ain't bin hyer sence the airthquake, that's sure, er he wouldn't be a-frolicin' down, to'rads Chiny, er ther other place."

"It's just what I always said, Dave," replied a second voice, not as rough as the first, but with less of regret in its tone.

"Only go slow on your shooting, and if his time has come to go out of the dew it will be provided for. This saves us, and him, and them, all around. Larry ought to know it."

"Larry'll find it out soon enough. He hedn't ary use fur him; an' it won't hurt him ter be keepin' his eye open a leetle longer. We war ter stay hyer tell daylight; an' blame me ef I ain't goin' ter stay."

"Always provided the gentleman known as Ready Rank don't bring up his forces. I don't want to see him too close; and I guess Larry don't want to put eyes on him at all. He talks a little about a settlement, and all that, but if he had twice as many men at his back he would have no business with Rank when the old rustler got really down to work on the war-path."

"Oh, bosh, Bitters! He's a good man ter be sure; but he ain't got his ole pards behind him. Billy Barton are a good leetle man, fur he downed Larry t'other night afore he begun ter move, but it warn't fur keeps, an' ther rest don't count much, ez we hev figgered 'em out. Sich men ez Tom Twofeet an' Bandy Bruce are tough nuts, but 'round hyer they ain't jest at home."

"Ef thar's coin ter be made they are mighty willin' ter git a sheer in it ef they hev ter fight fur it, but it takes a leetle su'thin' more ner that, an' you an' me, Bitters, would be able fur ther raft ov 'em, leavin' out ther bosses. An' ef you cut yerself clean loose, I wouldn't like ter gamble on Rank, hisself. Eh, pard?"

"Dry up on the taffy. We knew what the chances were when we came out, and we'll have to stand them. We have the inside track just now, and we got to keep it. That's all there is in it."

If Pony Taylor could have heard the conversation he would not have had any trouble to understand the situation. It is hardly worth while to waste time in explaining that Red Larry was not as dead as he had seemed when he dropped away from the fingers of Billy Barton at the Flume, and that he was on the trail with a second gang; or that Mr. Lyons and his daughter had dropped, so to speak, from the frying-pan into the fire.

The capture was so simple that it was really child's play. When the two were awakened the man who should have been on guard was away on a scout, and there was no chance for resistance, and very little for expostulation. They were hurried down into the canyon proper, and then led away in the darkness, after a few threats, the vagueness of which made them doubly awful.

It had been a narrow escape for Taylor himself, since at the very time he was talking with Bedrock, Red Larry was scarcely a stone's throw distant, and listening eagerly. He had his hand on his revolver once when he thought his presence had been suspected, and only for the restraining hand of Bitters, which had dropped upon his wrist, he might have fired.

The coming of Primrose had covered their advent, and when Taylor followed on after the man of rags, they had the coast clear to get in their work.

Bitters and Dandy Dave were left behind, to gather what information they could, and if possible watch the movements of the sport on his return. There was not much danger to be apprehended from one man, but it was just as well to know what he was about.

That part of the arrangement was quietly made, for it was not the plan of Red Larry to allow his prisoners to know that there was any likelihood of Taylor attempting to aid them.

On the contrary, he gave them to understand that he had been disposed of before their capture, and that there was nothing left for them but to submit to his guidance and tender mercies, which he gave them to understand would be a good deal more to their liking than if they had fallen into the hands of Ready Rank.

The flight along the canyon was not a rapid one while they followed the course of the stream; but shortly after passing the spot where Pony Taylor came to grief there was again a practicable route to the trail above, and here the dried-up bed of the Sunken River was left.

Red Larry was as well aware as any one of the condition of the arm which Mr. Lyons carried in a sling, and he handled the prisoners as gently as though they were made of spun glass.

A single man stood waiting for the party when they reached the trail.

While he could guess who it was coming he left nothing to chance. As they came straggling up the bank he greeted them with a challenge which was quickly answered; yet he only dropped the muzzles of his revolvers when Larry stepped into view.

"It's all right, pard. This time we got ther dead medicine on racket, and when these little birds have sung their tune there will be nothing more to hear. It's been a long wait; but if there is any coin in it you bet it's going to come now."

"You have them?"

"You bet—and just in time. Rank is not far off, and if he is as full of business as he generally is when he starts on the trail, he would

have had them before morning. Then, where would we have come in at?"

"You saw him, did you?"

"Not much. The less I see of him till this trick is worked the better I will like it. He only has half a dozen men behind him; but he counts for a round dozen himself. I got the points from one of his men, who was letting his tongue run about the outfit when he didn't know who was listening to him. It has been a tough night of it on me; and I guess the old man here, thinks the same for himself; but we have got to travel on, till we get out of the draft. Bitters and Dave are on the watch, and when they pick up a point or two will be ready to follow. They won't start before daybreak, but that's not so far off, and if they don't lose their way they ought to get in 'most as soon as we do. Are the horses all right?"

CHAPTER XXX.

RED LARRY TALKS VERY STRAIGHT.

To Mr. Lyons it all seemed like a troubled dream, when he tried to think it over.

He had trusted to Taylor by instinct; and instinct seemed to have deceived him. He felt sure there could have been no conflict previous to his capture, for nothing serious could have occurred without some noise being made. The man he thought as full of courage as of strength had become frightened, and deserted his charges in the darkness, and in an unknown land.

The journey through the darkness, carefully as he had been handled, was like a nightmare; and the awakening only the more real because the more terrible.

They were encamped in the very refuge at which Taylor had been aiming. Lyons recognized it from the few words their late guide had let fall, and that set him on a new train of thought.

What if he had been betrayed all through; and these men were only the confederates of the traitor?

There was one satisfaction.

So far, Edna had been treated with the utmost consideration, and did not appear to be greatly frightened at the capture, or troubled about the future.

For her sake he endeavored to keep up his own spirits, without thinking that she might be playing the same game; only, with a woman's wit she had begun it first.

They were alone together, and just as surely prisoners as could be, even if they were not fettered and there seemed to be nothing but a single guard, stationed a score or more of paces away, to hinder a dash for freedom.

From the moment of the capture the two had maintained comparative silence. They had no idea of speaking until they understood the meaning of the attack. Nothing could be gained by an outcry; and something might be lost by too suddenly deciding what to promise, or what to offer.

When they had eaten their breakfast, and had been left alone for a little it was different. The men appeared to have all they wanted to do waiting for the coming of the two men left in the canyon as a rear guard, and watching for the possible pursuit.

"And what now?"

Edna was the first to speak seriously of the situation. Up to this but few words had passed between the two.

"I know as little about the situation as you do. All we can do is to wait. A cripple and a girl can scarcely hope to hold their own against a force like this, unless fate puts some extraordinary advantage into their hands."

"But what is the meaning of it all? These are not the men we were expecting; and from what I have overheard they have as much to dread from the men who were in pursuit of us as we fancied we had. Who are they?"

"Another gang, but just as unscrupulous, and perhaps more so. It is as Taylor at first said it might be. We have started the rush again, after the lost mines, and the hidden bonanza. Heaven only knows how many more men of the same stripe are to come."

"The more the merrier. They may be like the Kilkenny cats. When they have slaughtered each other our time will come."

"If we are not slaughtered with them."

"No danger of that, so long as there is justice in Heaven. Why, this very move may point out to us the men we are the most anxious to reach. We may lose the treasure; but we will hang the men who killed Paul Prindle. That being done I am satisfied."

"Better that half, if only half the victory can be won; but I am not despairing yet. If only you could have been left behind! Torture could not have drawn a word from me. They know too much not to have had an eye in this direction before; and the questions they may ask will be hard to dodge, but I shall do my best. And you know nothing. That is your safest line. I am crazy over a hidden treasure that I have heard of, and you have come with me as my guardian. That is the scheme. Hush, now. One of them is coming, and we will soon know what they want, and what they think they can get."

He closed hastily, for Red Larry was ap-

proaching, and Mr. Lyons had made a close guess at what he had to say, and the questions he intended to ask.

Red Larry was not a young man, and he had lived a life of the kind which leaves hard lines on the face.

His cheeks were a little paler than usual, from the blood-letting lately received at the hands of Billy Barton; but he had hard, cruel eyes, which were as keen as they had ever been, and they looked through and through Mr. Lyons as he came nearer.

"Well, old man, hope you have found everything as comfortable as you expected?"

The smile of Mr. Lyons was ghastly, as he looked around him.

"Comfortable? Yes, as much so as one uncertain whether he is to live or die can be. The breakfast was not bad, and with our own blankets to sleep on there is little to be complained of in regard to the other accommodations. Of course, the picnic is delightful."

"That's the way to say it, even if you don't think exactly after that fashion. No use to begin by swearing at a man. There may be a chance to make a good bargain if you wait and see. Get his everlasting mad up, and he takes what he wants, and makes no bargain at all. Satisfactory?"

"No sir. I cannot understand. There is no bargain to be made, as far as I know. My partner and I had but a scanty stock of supplies, and as yet we have not reached the regions where we expected to prospect. You have already taken everything of value which we had, and the only thing we can ask, or expect, is for you to turn us adrift. It would be too much to believe you will return us to the camp from which we were dragged, but perhaps we can find our way to it. If not, our horses are lost to us, and we must travel on the best way we can."

"Oh, simmer on all that rigmarole, and come right down to business. Don't you suppose I had an eye on you back at the Bar, and just as keen a one as ever Ready Rank had in his head?"

"I do not understand what you mean; and of any such person as Ready Rank I never heard. What has he to do with the present situation?"

"Doctor Rice will do as well, if you never heard the other name. He didn't think I had caught on to him; but I don't let an old side pard fool me, if he does tog himself out in a big wig, and long whiskers. He was onto you from the day you came into camp; and so was I."

"Again, I must say, I do not understand you."

"Rub up that memory of yours, old man. A good many years ago Rank and I were on the track of a neat little cache, but somehow we missed it, though it wasn't because we didn't look hard enough for it. I didn't see he was trying to throw off on me; but since then he has played dirt on me, and I can understand it all right now. That little pard of his pretty near did for me the other night, and I guess it was Rank set him up to it. You can gamble on it I have no use for either of them in mine, and since I got hold of you I wouldn't wonder if I took the trick after all the waiting."

"I tell you, I know nothing about any cache, and have no idea of finding one. If you have been waiting so many years perhaps some one else has been more fortunate. Go to your old comrade in crime if you want information. I do not understand you, and there is no intelligence to be got out of me."

"Just where you are away off. You didn't comedown here without knowing what you were about. You had the items, and that man, Taylor, was to do the work. I may as well let you know he has gone through the shute, and any bargain you made with him is off. That being the case I make you a fair and square offer. Give me your points and I'll do the work better than he would have ever done."

Lyons shook his head obstinately, but said nothing. Having once begun the game of ignorance he was going to carry it through.

"Won't work. I am going mighty slow with you now, because I think there is still a chance for you to listen to reason. When I change the deal it will be with a vengeance."

"I tell you, it is all a mistake."

"All a mistake that Paul Prindle made a strike, sent for his wife to join him, bid his gold while he went to meet her, dropped out some way on the road and never was heard of again; that his wife came on, and couldn't find hair nor hoof of him, and started back East, to be lost on the steamer? Oh, I tell you, we keep notes of all the points when we see a chance for coin in the distance."

"But what is Paul Prindle to me?" asked Lyons, desperately.

He saw that this man was thoroughly posted, and was going to be hard to throw off the track.

"Nothing much, but that wife of his was your sister, if I have picked up the rights of the story. Now, then, last time of asking. You had a map that showed a heap more than you have been willing to say. Hand it over and we hunt up the bonanza for you, and give you a square half. After that, if you want to get back on Rank for good and even, it won't be hard to get some of the boys to help you over the raffle. Saints couldn't

offer fairer, for there's no reason why we shouldn't corral the whole boodle."

"Man alive! Can't you see that if you were right I would jump at the chance? What better could I do? Why, if you leave us to go our way the chances are we will starve. If I only could make a fortune that easy you can't think how quickly I would do it."

"That's going to be your game is it?"

Larry spoke with a slow, steady determination, which left no doubt of his earnestness.

"Now, I will give it to you straight. There never was a life or two that could stand between me and ten thousand dollars, to say nothing of the amount there is in this. I don't want to kill you, because there is money in you; but you'll wish you were dead long before I get to the end of this thing, if you try to hold out."

"For the present you have a little time to think it over. We can't move out of here till we see what sort of a move Rank is going to make. He is a good man, and so is his little pard; but the fellows training with him don't amount to much. I don't say I would sooner have a square fight with the old king-pin of the rustlers; but if it comes, we can give a good account of ourselves—besides saving you and the little party, there, a heap of danger. Rank is a bad man to fool with."

"But when we get things squared with him, one way or another, we get down to business with you. You'll talk then, or we'll scrape your very bones to see if the secret is not written there. You understand? I don't count on killing you, but we'll grind till the secret comes out, if there is nothing left but a little suffering life. The body will be nothing much to speak of."

"I understand," replied Lyons, soberly; "but all the same, I know nothing about what you are speaking of."

"So-long, then, for the present, and if you understand what is good for your soul's salvation, you will try and find out."

CHAPTER XXXI.

BITTERS GETS THE DROP.

SELIM stood watch without alarm for the rest of the night, and secure in the guardianship of his steed, Ready Rank threw himself down and slept a sleep that was as sound as the sleep of the righteous.

When morning came, however, he was up betimes.

The exertions of the previous night had given Bedrock an extra capacity for sleep. The sun shone on his eyes, but he never blinked. When the rustler stirred him with his foot he thrust his hand mechanically toward his belt, and then snored on.

"The infernal brute!" said Rank, turning to Billy Barton, with disgust written all over his face.

"All the luggage he thought of bringing along was his arms, and two jugs of benzine, slung over his saddle. And the worst of it is, there is not another man in the outfit can drink the liquid fire and brimstone. I am going on your say-so a good deal, my son, and it has seemed, once or twice, that he was a useful sort of a brute to have around; but he is the worst I ever traveled with. I expect we will have to cut his throat before we are done with him. I may be wrong, but it strikes me he is beginning to put on airs."

"He saved my life when Larry's gang had the chance of the season for an interesting necktie party. And every time he has had the chance he has shown he had good metal in his get-up. Drunk or sober he is the best man you have in the outfit."

"Too blame good, perhaps. We'll see, later on. I am not trusting him further than I can see. There is something too infernally familiar in his looks. He may not have recognized the doctor; but when he dropped his eyes on me, I could see he recognized me from the ground up."

"Not more than a thousand other men would do; and be all the better pards for the doing of it."

"Pards, blazes! A thing like he is will do for a tool; but when he gets through with his job, the best thing he can do is to go to the happy land of Canaan. I won't need him here."

By a sort of mutual consent, the two had drawn aside, and were walking away, conversing in a low tone. If Uncle Bedrock was asleep, their words would hardly waken him, since, waking, Rank did not believe they could be heard.

A grim smile crept up to the inside of the lips of the tramp—and stopped there.

He was not the sort of man to make much outward show, even if he was sure no one was watching him; but he felt a great deal.

"He brought us the news last night, straight enough," continued Billy.

"Strikes me, if you don't want to trust him, it would have been as well to have left him out of the outfit altogether. He may kick if he finds he is not in on the ground floor with the rest; and if I am not mistaken he has the capacity for doing that same equal to a thousand mules, and sixteen droves of Texas steers."

"Good enough. That is what I want him to do. Then I will be sure of my ground, and

take him on the wing. I know there is no use to pump him as to his antecedents, and even Ready Rank is hardly the kind to shoot a fellow in the back on bare suspicion.

"But let that go. There is no doubt they are in the pocket, and the land-slide shuts them in unless they have taken to the canyon. To do that they have got to abandon their horses, and with a woman in the lay-out, I suspect they would sooner take the back track."

"Then, you want to find out what they are doing?"

"Exactly. And I suppose there is not a man in the gang here, but you—or myself—I can trust to do the work."

"All right, I'll do it—if you won't trust Sandy. You want to stay here, I suppose, and see they don't make good their retreat?"

"That is the size of it. There is not much time to be wasted. When they get to the slide, they will stop an hour to prospect and make up their minds. Then they will begin to act; and when Pony Taylor moves it is sometimes like a streak of light. If he was alone in this thing, I wouldn't expect to head him off; but a cripple and a woman for the rest of the outfit will be a drag, work it as he wants to."

"If I find them, you don't want any of this sort of thing?"

Billy drew his revolver, balanced it in his hand, and looked lovingly along the barrel as he sighted at the head of Ragged Rufe, which was visible in the distance.

"Hold on! No! If I thought you would try anything of the kind, I'd—I'd drop you myself. I have figured the thing out, and the answer proves every time. The coin first; and these two will lead us right to it. After that, Taylor belongs to me, and I'll settle with him. There is a score to settle a year long; and when I'm done, he'll be ground to powder."

"Have it your own way," carelessly answered Barton, returning his pistol.

"You seem to have it in for him solid, and all I have to say is I pity him as he goes through the mill. I never felt that way toward mankind but once, and I remember what it was like. Sail in and prosper. You run the apple-cart, and I'm just tagging after to get what fruit drops out behind."

Bedrock yawned and rolled over as they came back to the camp. Tommy Twofoot and his pard, Bandy Bruce, had been on guard the latter part of the night, and looked enviously at the man of rags as he leisurely arose.

"Well, boss, w'ot's ther racket fur ther day?"

"Lay low, and keep dark," was the terse rejoinder of the rustler.

"When there is anything to do you will get your orders. If I find you monkeying around without them there will be cold meat. Get yourself together if you are done snoozing, and be ready for what comes your way."

"Ye'r shoutin', now. Shows I wa'n't fur off when I thunk it war time to git a move on. Sandy are ready now, an' all ther time, all he needs are a boss ter pull ther strings an' he kin jump with ther jumpists."

There was no evidence of offense at the harsh answer which had greeted him, and he moved off with alacrity to the jugs which had aroused the ire of the rustler.

Billy Barton had claimed to be an all-around man; and young though he was in appearance the head on his shoulders had always seemed old enough to justify his claims. When he moved off a little later Rank saw him go without any fears that he would not be able to accomplish his errand as successfully as the rustler could have done himself. He dropped down into the canyon with only a nod of leave taking, and moved lightly and cautiously along till he was out of sight.

Ready Rank had given him no cautions as to keeping out of sight; but that went without saying. The rustler believed that so far Taylor was not aware of pursuit, and it was the life of his scheme that the wandering trio should not suspect it.

"I half think he suspects me," was Billy Barton's thought, as he vanished from view of the camp.

"Of course, it is all right for him to want to be on hand to move the camp in case they should take the back track before I can return; but all the same, I wouldn't be surprised if he came along in the rear to see what I am doing. Then the tramp will be apt to follow him, and the rest come tagging after the tramp, and we will all get on the ground together. What an elegant racket that would make, especially if Taylor dropped to it in time."

He laughed at the idea, and then his face grew sober. The work he had set out to do was more than a joke. A skulker around the camp might fare badly.

"Strange that so many men who have hunted over this ground should get together at one time. One knows just where to plant his foot, and another just where to look for the print of it. After all the time thrown away it hardly seems possible any luck will come to this expedition. There may be some old scores settled, but the more I think of it the more I doubt that the treasure will be found, or any traces of the mine."

At first he moved along with a confident step, though occasionally the roughness of the route made his progress slow. After a few miles had been passed over he stepped more cautiously, and from time to time stopped to listen. He did not intend to be surprised.

When he came to the point below where the camp of Taylor had been he halted like one who knew he was at the right point in the road to turn aside.

"It would be uncomfortable to be caught climbing there," he thought looking upward.

"If I did not feel sure they had gone on I would not risk it. They might not wait for explanations, but shoot on sight. Lookaas though there had been more than one pair of feet over the ground, so they can hardly notice if I follow over the same trail."

He went on up without difficulty, and after peeping cautiously over the edge to see that the coast was clear, advanced to the spot where the camp had been.

It was daylight, now, and he could see some things which had escaped the notice of Pony Taylor. There were a few little articles scattered around where they had been dropped, that told a story to the keen eyes falling upon them.

"Looks like a flight, or something worse; what is in the wind? There has been some coming and going here, that needs accounting for. Looks don't always count, but I should say there has been foul play. Could that man Taylor have played them false?"

With a troubled look in his face he beat around over the rocks, noting how the horses had been wandering, and finally followed their tracks as they returned once more to the spot of the land-slide.

He was careful to keep a keen watch ahead, so as to be ready to drop down out of sight the moment he discovered the party he was trying to trail; but he might as well have gone boldly forward.

"They never went upward," he said at length, with a shake of his head, his glance running up the almost perpendicular wall of rock blocking the way.

"And if they went down it was not from here as a starting point," he added, craning his neck over the brink of the canyon.

"It seems like a pity to leave the horses here, but they are stripped of anything of value and turned loose. I guess they can take care of themselves till Rank has his say-so as to what to do with them. For one reason or another Taylor has taken to the lower canyon, and I'll have to see where he has gone to if I take the jump flying."

He did not risk his neck in that way, however, but went back to the point which he knew was a safe one to start from, examining the ground carefully as he went.

Down in the canyon once more, he drifted along more rapidly than before. Whether the party were in full flight, or whether they were being hurried away, there was not much danger of his overtaking them soon.

When he came to the spot where Pony Taylor had dropped into the chute he halted in surprise.

"Something new at last; and by heavens it looks as though some one had traveled the road to the infernal regions against his will. The green moss is lately scraped aside, and it seems to me I can see the fingers of a man clutching in vain at the projecting point of rock. If he went down there he never touched bottom alive. It might be a thousand miles down."

Who had taken the drop?

That was a question easier asked than answered. It was not likely all had gone the same way; and when he had found traces of some one passing beyond he left the vicinity of the yawning pit into which the waters of the Sunken River were flowing, and soon found himself walking in the former bed of the stream.

"It's going to be a longer job than we counted on and I suppose I ought to go back and give the points as I have found them. But that would not be according to orders, and we'll obey them if it breaks owners. I can guess, now, where this trail is coming out at; and I don't leave it until I know just who is at the other end."

He was so positive that he spoke the words aloud without knowing it, and then doggedly bent forward, and went on with a tramp that was almost savage. An hour later and he left the bed of the canyon at a point where there was a well-defined trail upward, and without hesitation made his way along a narrow mountain gorge.

He had a fixed point in his mind, now, and scarcely expected interruption before he came within sight of it. It was the surprise of his life when he heard a coarse voice, not any too far away:

"Don't be a fool, Billy. Han's up, er pard an' me'll hev ter drill yer!"

Looking upward, in the direction of the sound, his hands rising as he looked, he saw Bitters and his pard looking down at him through the sights of their Winchesters, and knew they both meant business.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THREE IN A DUNGEON.

"So this is a bit of your work, is it?" asked Barton coolly, as he stood at ease, with elevated hands.

"No back talk, Barton," retorted Bitters, who always spoke after his pard had got in the first word; but generally with something more to the point.

"We are only deck hands, and if you have anything to say you can speak it when you get up to the captain's office. Of course, we have to take you in, because where Billy Barton is, the man they call Doctor Rice up at the Bar is not very far behind."

"And Red Larry is the captain? Humph! I thought he had laid off for repairs; but this only shows a man slips up on a sure thing. All right, boys. I know something about your shooting, and you could get in three shots apiece before I could reach cover. When a fellow has been so dog-gone careless as I have he deserves all he gets."

"I wouldn't advise you to make any remarks to the old man about those same repairs. He's not likely to be forgetting who tried to send him into the bone-yard, but if you stir him up about it too much he will be raving mad. And when Larry gets that way he can bite, hard."

Leaving Dave to keep the prisoner covered, Bitters stepped cautiously down and relieved him of his weapons, which he strung around him, over his own belt.

"Now, hay-foot, straw-foot, left and right! Forward march! There is no use to put hoppers on a man of your sense. You ought to know if you try to jump the game, down you go. It's lucky you came along when you did, too. Dave and I had just started to pull foot for headquarters when we got a glimpse of you, coming down the benyon. This will make Larry too happy, and we can get all the news he wants about what Rank is up to."

"Who's Rank?" asked Barton, as he trudged along in front, his hands now swinging easily by his side.

"Don't try to play off innocent. Red Larry knew Doctor Rice before you were born, and trained behind Ready Rank when he was king-pin of the rustlers. He says there's no difference; and what he says goes. Now, button! There is business in front of us; and you want to save your breath to mend your bellows with."

Although both men knew the little gambler as a man of thorough grit they were satisfied that their capture was an important one.

Without a doubt he knew what were the plans of Ready Rank, and if so Larry could make him unfold them. There were some legends of the past which went to show there was little difference in conscience between Rank and his former pard, and both of them had ways and means of procedure it was not good to talk of before one with tender nerves.

Nor did the two men want to wait for Rank to develop his intentions. They had no idea of allowing him to overhaul them if he was on the trail, being pretty sure they could not catch him in the same trap that had netted Billy Barton.

Their return was more like a flight than a triumphal procession, and when they reached the inter-mural recess where their companions were encamped they were too well tired to feel the sense of relief they were entitled to.

"By the heavens! but this is worth waiting for," was the exclamation of Larry, as Barton was brought into his presence.

"I knew it would come before we got back, but I didn't think it would be quite so soon. Rank knew I would be on the ground as soon as he would, if I had the chance, and so he sent you out to tickle my ribs with a knife. A dear thing it will be for you, Billy Barton; and when the reckoning comes with Rank he will say the same."

"Get off with that nonsense," retorted Barton, contemptuously.

"If there had been any dirt played it would not have been by the hands of yours truly. We differed on a point at cards; you tried to pull, and I got my knife in first. Then these peaceful little lambs that sport around behind you froze right in and wanted to swing me, first thing. That's all there was of it, and if the thing wasn't done according to your ideas, why, do it over; that's all there is about it. Billy Barton never eats dirt, or squeals if the shoe pinches."

"Yes, but this time you are going to squeal so loud it will be a howl. It has come on me a little too sudden to decide just what ought to be done. You will have an hour or two to think over the position. In that time I can make up my mind."

"Anyway, it will be something dreadful, no doubt," laughed Barton.

He met the fiery gaze of the man without quailing, and his words were a taunt, that seemed purposely spoken to drive Larry to sudden desperation.

What might have been the issue had the conversation continued much longer on the lines as started can readily be guessed; but Dandy Dave came with an interruption:

"Reckon, boss, unless ye'r' too busy yer hed better take a squint at su'thin' we kin see at ther other end ov ther plain. We may be 'way off, but it looks ez though Ready Rank war comin' now, with all his rustlers."

"There is time for that always. Look after this party—turn him in along with the other cattle. When Rank comes it will be a-boiling. I'll say that for him."

"All right; but I don't guess it's safe ter take so many chances with him?"

"Of course not. A cripple and a girl are not dangerous; but this fellow is a wildcat, as you cught to know. Look out he don't claw you. And if he gets away I'll take it out of you, same as if he didn't."

"You hear him, Billy? I got it straight from headwaters, an' that war what I wanted. I didn't know ef 'he'd allow shootin' if you war skippin' ther ranch; an' I don't figger it healthy fur you ter be runnin' round loose. It might be all right fur Larry, but whar would I come in at?"

"Oh, you only kick as he pulls the halter. It's Larry I am after; and much obliged am I for your introduction. I might have waited a long time before I found out he hadn't hopped the twig."

Dave grinned, but said nothing more. Although he was well enough satisfied in his own mind that when he went back to Mineral Bar, or any other convenient outpost of population, Billy Barton would be permanently left behind, it was as well not to run any more risks than were needful.

"Hyer's a pardner fur you two ter chin' with a bit," was his greeting to Lyons, as he steered Barton into the presence of the other prisoners.

"Thar's no 'bjection to a moderate 'mount ov chinnin'; but you don't want to get up too much gush over yer feller-sufferer. It might make me sick enough ter waltz in with a club. I'm responsible fur ther outfit, an' I mean ter keep yer well under."

Barton looked up curiously from under the rim of his hat as he passed Edna, and for a moment his eyes rested searchingly on her fair, young face.

Then he nodded silently, and passed on over to the opposite corner of the dungeon-like room; the door closed again, shutting out the sunlight, and the three were alone together.

Had the new arrival been any one else, or, rather, had it been a stranger, he would have been more likely to meet with a welcome from Mr. Lyons.

As it was, the latter recognized the arrival at once, and was satisfied he should remain at a distance. As the right hand man of Doctor Rice—or of Ready Rank, as he was beginning to be called—Billy Barton was an object of fear as much as of anything else.

Barton, however, did not attempt any conversation, or show any curiosity in regard to the interior of the prison-pen. Perhaps he knew the place as well, even, as Red Larry.

He threw himself lazily down, propped his head on his elbow, closed his eyes, and went off into dreamland without delay. Others had been more on the stretch during the past night; but he had the chance for rest now, and took it.

His slumbers were uninterrupted for a longer time than he could have expected when he began them. It was well on toward dark when Dandy Dave opened the door to admit Bitters with a nose-bag of supplies.

"Hyer's yer supper!" shouted Dave.

"Lay hold an' eat hearty, fur thar's no tellin' when you'll git another one. Hyer's yer fresh meat, an' hyer's yer hard tack. Ef you war back East, at ther Astor, you couldn't git nothin' finer."

"You needn't shout so loud, David," said Barton, quietly coming forward. "I don't admire the table-linen, and that horse-bucket itself might be cleaner, but to a man who has eaten nothing since daylight, the provender has a mighty good smell. What is it—mustang steak?"

"Mustang nothin'. It's a heifer two years old, and fat as butter. You can thank Rank for it. He drove part of the herd this way, and saved us the trouble of killing the herders."

"If there were any. I suspect your herd were mavericks, and if Rank had a horse under him, he has roped the pick of the lot; but this is good enough eating for me. Anything new outside?"

The three moved upon the common center as by a single impulse. Hunger can draw the most discordant elements near together.

"Pears ter me I've told yer a heap a'ready. Thar war a chance t'et the boss would make a bargain. He war mighty anxious to know what war Rank's game; an' he'd hev fergive thet ticklin' with the steel ter know. He don't need it now, though. Rank's not fur off, an' speakin' fur hisself. Ther outline now are ter string yer up et daybreak ter-morrer, jest ter make Ready r'ar. Ther earth ain't big enough fur your boss an' mine, sence both ov 'em wants ther hull ov it; an' I reckon we got ther inside track."

"True bill, that, eh? Well, there don't seem to be water enough to drown one in this infernal country, so I suppose I may as well get ready for the other thing. Daylight to-morrow, you

say? Can't you put it an hour or so later, and let my teeth meet once more in a steak like that? My regards to Larry, and tell him he knows the choicest cuts. Another one like this and I could die happy. It's the first meat worth the eating I've struck since I went in off the range."

"Oh, you'll die a-shoutin', anyhow. The two bez had some kind ov a pow-wow at long range, with white flags a-floppin', an' that sorter nonsense, an' ther boss wants ter let Ready know positive what he thinks ov him."

"And will stretch my neck, accordingly. Not a bad scheme. Sorry I won't be on hand to see what Rank does on the strength of it; but I can guess. It will be a shade late for me; but there's a heap of satisfaction in imaginin'."

Billy spoke between mouthfuls, and did not neglect trencher duty. If he had been left to have his way, he might have kept Dandy Dave talking indefinitely; but Bitters had a word to say.

"Button, both of you! It's not the thing to joke about. If you have any prayers handy, Billy, it's a good time to say them to-night. If I had known how it was going to go, blessed if I would have taken a hand in, but it's too late. It's lead now, or hemp in the morning, though I guess it won't be quite so early as daybreak."

"All right! Hemp is good enough for me," retorted Barton with a shrug of the shoulders that was characteristic.

Bitters shook his head solemnly, and went out.

Dandy Dave followed shortly afterward, and Edna could stand it no longer. She had heard unmoved the threats against her and her adopted father—partly, perhaps, because she could see a way out for them if the worst came to the worst.

"Surely," she said, in a low tone, "they can not mean it."

"Every word of it, little woman."

"And there is no hope?"

"Lots of hope; but the chances are all against us. Better not talk now. If the worst comes to the worst I may have something to say, though the whole truth would be almost too much for you. If Rank was in earnest, now, I would expect developments before morning; but the worst of it is, I more than half think he would be willing I should go over the range; and he's not half wrong in it. That will do. Your sympathy does me more harm than good."

"But, if he only knew!"

"As well that he don't. You are as safe in the hands of Red Larry as in his. They are old comrades in crime, who have fallen out, and there is not a toss-up between them."

He moved over to the corner he had at the first pre-empted, and threw himself down once more in the same easy attitude.

Edna watched the dusky outlines of his figure by the waning light which straggled in through the narrow window in the stone wall beneath which a guard was posted. She was getting near to the terrible, and began to fear for her nerves.

In a low tone Lyons spoke to her, and for some time a conversation was kept up between the two, but it gradually died away. In the silence and darkness there was nothing for them to do but to fall asleep or go mad.

When Edna awoke it seemed to her that she had slumbered for an age, and she was positive that a familiar voice was sounding in her ears, which seemed to say: "Hyer's yer pard ter tie to. Hussel out, now, an' we'll make ther rifle yit."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A WILD SKEDADDLE.

THE voice sounded too plainly to mistake it for a voice in a dream. Silently but swiftly Edna rose to her feet. If she was not greatly deceived the man who had rescued her from her abductors at the fallen tree was again near.

She could see nothing, but heard a whisper from Billy Barton.

"That's all right, pard, but you needn't sing it out quite so loud. Where are you?"

"My melo'jus whisper wouldn't kerry a rod; but it sounds ter you ez ef a cannon had went off. I got yer down all right. Whar's ther rest, an kin they be woken up 'thout givin' a shout?"

"Sh!" warned Edna, a movement of Lyons telling he was aware of the presence.

"We are listening now. Who is it; and what is it?"

"Won't do ter menshun no names; but I are a frien' frum 'wayback, an' jess dropped in ter 'range things a leetle. Dunno ez I orter bother, seein' ez I hed no orders; but w'en I see ther chance fur fun a hull reegiment couldn't hole me back. Et I onderstan's ther siterashun you'd like ter be crawlin' out ov this. Ef that's so, now's yer time ter crawl."

"But where will we go to, and what is the meaning of this, anyhow? The men we understand are out yonder as much our enemies as these who have us in their keeping; and if you are a friend of theirs you cannot be a friend of ours."

Mr. Lyons thought it time to take a hand in. He was not sure this was not a trap of some kind;

and he was not so broken up by his misfortunes as to flee headlong, without a thought of where he was to land.

"Pard, it's your say-so. You kin leave er you kin stay. I ain't engaged ter deliver yer to nobody er I'd flop over ther goods an' not ask yer permisshun. I thort you might be willin' ter pull foot mes'ary d'reeshun so it war away frum hyer; but ef I war mistooked, w'y, stay, dog-gun ye! Billy an' me'll be makin' tracks all ther taller. Ef I meet Pony Taylor I'll say ez you koncluded not ter wander, an' he kin look fur ye hyer, ef meantime yer ain't clumb a tree."

"Do not put your faith in Taylor," interposed Barton, who had been silently listening.

"If I mistake not he will never be seen again. He fell into a trap of nature's own setting and was buried when the jaws sprung. And you need not put faith in us. You would be foolish if you did. But once outside and you can leave us and trust to your own resources. You cannot make matters worse for yourselves; and after what you have seen of our entertainer here I should think the chances were they could be decidedly bettered."

"Yes, yes, we will go!" hastily whispered Edna.

"But how are we to escape from this? I do not understand yet how this man succeeded in reaching us. Have the guards been withdrawn?"

"Scassly; an' ef they don't hear us a-buzzin' vit, it'll be ther eighth wonder. But, yer Uncle—ah—Sandy, explored this hyer rooins afore Paul Prindle found his bonanza. He knows ther ways in, an' ther ways out, an' w'en Billy goes with me you may ez well prance er-long. Gimme yer han' an' I'll lead yer in ther middle ov ther road."

Bedrock came near making a bad break just then, but he caught himself in time, and it is doubtful if Billy Barton noticed how he stammered over his own name.

Outside of that he spoke frankly enough; and Edna was convinced. She caught her father with one hand, and extended the other to Bedrock, while Billy Barton brought up the rear, with his hand resting on the shoulder of Mr. Lyons.

"Stoop, now, an' look out yer don't jam yer skulls wide open. It's a narrer way you'll be travelin', an' these st'uns kin cut like a knife. When we git up ground ag'in you kin scatter ter suit yerselves; but thar's one warnin' more. It mout not be healthy fur you ter meet Billy an' me ag'in, an' ef yer do, don't yer trust us."

Billy remained silent.

This might not be the kind of work Rank wanted, but he was not on the ground to boss things, and for the present, what Bedrock said was bound to go. This was the second time he had dropped in at the moment of danger, and gratitude would compel that much, even if the revolvers of Bedrock did not have a persuasive way about them.

There was no great difficulty about finding the way, for it seemed to be a straight, low tunnel they were in, without any turnings and twistings by which they might be bewildered.

After a while it opened into a narrow fissure, the work of nature, and shortly afterward they came out from under a low overhanging rock. Below them lay the plain.

"Now, bein' ez you don't trust Billy an' me I guess we'll hev ter split. Ef I war you I'd steal long yanderways in ther shadder, and strike fur ther round hill yer sees in the deestan's. Thar's water on this side, in a leetle gorge ez ain't hard ter find, an' ef yer camped thar Pony might come your way afore you war a-thinkin' ov it. But ef he don't come, a straight shoot fur ther high hills ter ther notheast I'll bring yer out right at Min'el Bar, whar you kin refit, an' take a fresh start. So long, pards, an' be good ter yerselves. Billy an' me 'll strike fur ther camp, an' be riddy fur Larry in ther mo'nin'. Betcher sweet life he'll be too busy ter wander fur arter you."

Escape seemed assured, yet it was no pleasant matter for the two to go by themselves. The landmarks had been so plainly described they could scarcely go astray, but there might be other dangers on the way, and they were unarmed.

Lyons said as much, detaining Bedrock even after he had turned away.

"Could you not go with us?" he added.

"You are mistaken if you say we would not trust you; and I have no fears of your friend here, if he once decides to throw in his lot with ours. The company you have been in was none of the best, but it is not too late to desert it."

"Thanks fur yer good opinyun, an' Rank would say ther same ef he war nigh ter hear yer; but ther fack are, it's onpossible. Ef we git back Ready'll be strong ernuf ter be in biz with Red Larry an' his gang, an' won't be troublin' you. But ef we went back on him he'd know it afore noon, an' wouldn't let grass grow onder his feet afore startin' out ter round us up. Oh, no! Things are good ernuf ez they are; but I'll lend yer one ov my shootin'-irons tell I kin git a chance ter borry one ov Red Larry, er one ov his gang. Now, paddle! This time we're goin' ter start, sure."

The start was made, but when Bedrock and

Billy Barton had gone some short distance, the former turned his head and looked over his shoulder.

Mr. Lyons had already balted. Though his course had been marked out for him he wanted to discuss the subject a little. He was not sure, after all, that he would trust the coarse-spoken man, whose face he had not seen.

"That's the way with a blamed i'geot," muttered the man of rags, just loud enough to be overheard by his companion. "It's all so plain he won't run fur fear he'll hev ter read. It was safe ter bet heavy on his doin' thet same thing, an' thet Rank'll have 'em both afore mornin'. Leastwise, he would ef he war lookin' fur stray sheep by moonlight."

"If I thought that, I would go back and lead them away myself. I may be backing Rank's hand when he plays a fair game; but I don't propose to load up the advantages against green-horns like them. Say, old man, I'm Billy Barton, card-sharp and bad young man, that has been right-hand supporter for Ready Rank when he was playing roots on the Bar, and taking a chance to doctor up for the road again, but I'm not bad enough to wish that girl harm, coin or no coin."

"Notter doubt ov it, Billy. Notter doubt ov it. I knowed it thet minnit I seen yer stick that knife fur Larry's ribs, that night at ther Plume."

"Oh, dry up on that! What I was going to say is this: Suppose you pilot them in. I'll agree to keep Rank off the trail, and pay you a hundred for the work. That is as much as you would be likely to make if you stayed here, not saying anything about the chances of getting dropped while putting on side with Rank in one of his ugly moods."

"Can't do it, pard. I'm bired ter ther boss, an' I work ter orders. This are jest a side show ov me own by way ov 'xperymint, an' I ain't shore I bin a-doin' right. Let Pony take keer ov 'em. That's wot he war hired fur."

"But the man you call Pony is dead, without a doubt."

"Fur a corpse he's a high kicker yit. He went inter one eend ov ther shute, ter be sure; but he come outen ther other. Now, ef Larry ain't comin', I ain't waitin' no longer. Let's git inter camp, fur Ready are beginnin' ter worry 'bout yer, an' ef we don't turn up soon, he'll be chargin' on ther breastworks."

"And where is the camp?"

"Down yander. He's holdin' ther door shet, an' bound ter see thet Larry don't git away."

"And if Larry has lost his prisoners, what good will that do?"

"Ha, ha! Thet's fur him ter fine out. He hesn't tole me yit, thet I knows on."

Billy looked at the tramp as well as he could in the darkness, and shook his head. He hardly understood what sort of a man this was, and probably Bedrock did not intend he should.

They lingered no longer, though Barton did give one glance backward, to see that Mr. Lyons and Edna had moved from the spot where he had last seen them standing, and had vanished altogether.

Barton and his rescuer were on the other side of a wide range of rock, or they might have heard something of interest.

Dandy Dave, having been on guard all the previous night, was not in condition to keep his eyes open the whole of this, but he had a comrade who was in the same situation, and had been. Between them, Bitters and he thought they ought to be able to manage their duty. Either one might have succeeded alone; but, together, they both fell asleep.

When they awoke there was an uncertainty in their minds as to how nearly the night was ended, and it seemed like an age since they had seen the prisoners.

"Great Scott! Bitters, ef ther boss were onter this, we'd be gone coons. How do we know what's bin goin' on?"

"Nothing has been going on or off. Here we are, right where they had to pass. A mouse couldn't have gone through without waking us. It's all right."

Bitters was not as sure as he pretended, however, and when Dave moved to the door, he offered no objection.

"I can't rest tell I know; an' ef anything hez happened, blamed ef our best show ain't ter jump ther camp. I'll take one squint, and make sure."

"Take it then, and stop your infernal clatter. You'll have Larry up here, next, to see what is the matter."

Dave threw open the door.

Within all was darkness, but as he listened he thought he could hear the low breathing of the prisoners. He would have been satisfied with that, and would have turned aside had not Bitters, more persistent, struck a match and held it up over his shoulder.

As the little flame brightened a face grew into outline and feature before them; a face on which their eyes dwelt in horror.

They had seen Pony Taylor, back at Mineral Bar, and noted him well.

They had seen him since; and they had heard him when he went down into the shute of the Sunken River.

This face was his, and it appeared to be floating in the air, a very ghastly, ghostly visitor.

One more look they gave, a look so long it was almost a stare; then the match was dashed down.

"A ghost, by the eternal!" gasped Bitters, turning and dashing away in heedless panic, while Dandy Dave gave a wild yell, and threw himself over backward.

Very strange was it. Either of these men would have downed Pony Taylor living, without a spark of compunction; but from Pony Taylor dead they fled like frightened hounds.

The yell of the frightened man was heard, and before he had staggered once more to his feet, men were running in the direction of the sound. Bitters, who recovered something of his wits when once out of the place, thought it best to provide for his immediate safety by making a silent retreat, so that when Red Larry and several others came rushing up they found Dave standing in front of the empty prison, staring stupidly around.

His explanation was vague and unsatisfactory; but when Larry examined the place he found the prisoners were gone and there was no telling how they went.

"Scatter out men!" the leader shouted. "They can't have got far away and it's a hundred apiece to the men who find them. As for this fool, I'll settle with him later on."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A NIGHT MARCH.

RED LARRY had the advantage of position.

Perhaps he had counted on being followed more closely; and taking the rustler in an ambush. If he did he was doomed to disappointment, since Rank knew the ground as well as himself, and preferred a safer game. He had crossed the canyon of the Sunken River, and reached the mesa in front of Larry's position by a way that was more practicable, even if somewhat longer.

Although he knew there must be war between himself and his old-time pard he was in no hurry to begin it, even though delay might mean danger to the prisoners, and failure to himself.

He preferred for the present, to watch from some little distance, and see what Red Larry had in view.

Bedrock had dropped out without orders, and it was some time before his absence was observed. When Ready Rank knew of it he was thoughtful rather than angry, and prepared to keep a closer watch than ever during the night. Billy Barton, approaching the camp alone, was brought up at long range shooting distance, and it took a few moments' explanation before he got closer.

"Well, my son, this beats the deck," was the salutation of Rank, as the young man found himself fairly within the lines.

"Where have you been wandering, and how did you get here? I had been thinking the fellows over there had you, and were going to make it warm for your jacket."

"Correct you were, every time. He had it in for me, large as a cow, and didn't hesitate to tell me so. Had something to say about hemp at daylight, and the like. Oh, it was as uncomfortable a picnic as Billy Barton ever shook a foot at."

"How in the fiend's name did you manage to get away? Larry has a tolerably tight grip, if I have to say it."

"That same old Sandy, always on hand. If you can believe the story he was telling me as we came along, he has lived in this country something over a thousand years, and knows all about it, from a to amper-sand."

The brief information staggered the rustler.

"He did? He is too everlastingly fresh to live. I wanted to have the pleasure of doing the job myself, and here he has taken it out of my hands. Where is he now?"

"They seemed to have wakened up on the hill, and he turned back to see if he could find out what was the matter."

"And you let him go?"

"As he had the strength and the weapons on his side I don't see how I could have stopped him. I want tools of some kind, by the way. Larry has confiscated mine, and I won't feel half a man till I get heeled again."

"Much of a racket when you cleared out?"

"Not much at the time; but shortly afterward there was the deuce to pay. Wouldn't wonder if they got up nerve enough to come this way yet."

"Hum! Your Winchester is with the outfit, and there is a spare six in my kit. Heel yourself and then be on deck. I can smell business in the air."

It seemed a little strange that Rank asked no questions in regard to the other captives, whom he must have suspected were in the hands of the enemy. Billy Barton had been trying to frame a story that would cover the ground without positively putting him on the exact truth. It was discouraging to have wasted the time.

Rank had his own thoughts, however, hard as it might be to fathom them.

In a few minutes every man of the party was up and ready for work, and even the little gambler felt a thrill of excitement as Rank

turned to him with more seriousness than he usually showed.

"Now, my son, it is pretty plain that where you could get out we can get in; and if I haven't been away off in Billy Barton's caliber I should judge you were not one of the forgetting kind. Something tells me there is a chance here to strike it rich, and we won't wait on Sandy, but take it now. You go over the ground the same way you covered it as you came away, and we will go along. If we happen to chance on Larry spreading himself on the trail, he will be apt to have a headache in the morning."

"All right; you're the doctor. I'll do the best I can. It may be uncertain work, and one hill looks like another hill in the moonshine, but I think I can pilot you through. If I can't there will be no harm done trying."

Billy knew nothing of the apparition that had frightened the two guards, and supposed Lyons had long ago moved out of range, so he was safe in thinking this way. Otherwise, he might not have shown himself so confident about his not being able to do harm.

Of course, there was danger of meeting with Red Larry and his men on the way; but as a meeting had to come some time this was perhaps as suitable an hour as any.

The night was already well advanced, and it seemed likely it would barely be possible to make the shelter of the rocks before daylight. If there was any trouble about finding the spot, he was to seek, it might be later.

That, however, was Rank's look-out. The rustler asked but few questions, and had apparently made up his mind.

After that there was nothing to do but to follow orders.

The whole party moved off together.

It was part of the plan to go as far as possible on horseback, and then run the risks of leaving the animals behind under a guard. When the acclivity was reached, down which Bedrock had led the little gambler, a low order to dismount was given.

"Tommy, you and Bandy will look after the horses. I wish I had two better men for the work, but you want to understand that when I get back I want to find them here. You ought to know something about the sort of man I am; and I merely remark it will be awful unpleasant for you if you throw up your hands before I have played my game out."

"We understand, boss. Only, when you come up to us you want to let us know who it is. Ef thar's a man gits within ten rods ov us 'thout givin' ther signal he'll go onder 'thout bein' axed fur it."

"That is the way to talk it, my boy—see that you act as straight as you speak. If you don't intend to, you may as well be saying your prayers."

One spot looked pretty much like another, yet Billy Barton was confident he had not gone wrong. Many a man might have had his misgivings; but what the young sport knew he knew, and he piloted the rustler without a sign of hesitation.

Up the side of the hill they passed, the rocks growing more familiar to Billy as they went along; and finally the overhanging rock, with the narrow opening beneath, was at hand.

Barton stooped to listen for an instant before he spoke.

Then he pointed.

"Here's your back door; and at the other end I have no doubt you will find Red Larry and his men. I tell you now, if they happen to be watching the opening—and I am not sure I can work the stone that closed it after we passed through—it will be an elegant chance to wind up the whole of us. When we arrive, if it is not asking too much, I would as soon you would go first."

"Let up on that, my son. I know you don't mean a word of it. You have it in for Larry, and would just die if I didn't give you an even chance to get at him; and would a shade sooner you could go first."

"Perhaps, if it wasn't putting all the good cards in his pile. But I don't jump so savage at the bait when I know the dead medicine is against me. Come on, though! You will have to get on your knees for once, though I promise you won't stay there long."

"Perhaps, perhaps! Strange, I never dropped on to this secret of the rocks before. I have been over this ground, and so has Larry, more than once. It may mean a heap sight more than you have been letting on, and I want to be first on the ground."

"You think then?"

"Yes, of course I do. Ask me no more questions, but lead on. If the way is as plain sailing as you have said there is no need for lights—not yet awhile, at least."

"I am not so sure of that. Hark! What do you make of the sound? War somewhere; and we want to have a hand in it."

Billy spoke with an earnestness that was uncommon; but there was a cause for it.

In the distance, sounding strangely muffled, voices could be heard, and then reports of firearms.

"Forward all!" hastily ordered Rank, giving no heed to his young pard.

"No matter who is in the racket we take a hand in for ourselves. And remember, until I tell you to shoot to kill you want to hold your hands. If we can help it, Red Larry must not go down till we know what he has found out; and as for Taylor, if we find him, I'll kill the man who harms him if he can be taken alive. I've an old sore to settle, and I wouldn't miss the chance of doing it my way for a million."

In spite of their anxiety the progress was slow; and Rank had the opportunity to give his warnings as they moved along, though in spite of them every man had a cocked revolver in his hand, and it was more than likely would shoot at the drop of the hat, no matter where the bullets were to lodge.

Straight on they went, guided by the sounds, and by the wait of rock they could feel on either hand—and skipping nimbly behind them, his presence all unsuspected, came Ragged Rufe.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AT RAY.

WHEN Pony Taylor felt his feet slip from under him, as he tried in the darkness to step across the narrow current of the Sunken River, he was at first sure that his last hour had come.

As already hinted, he had been along the bed of the canyon before, but not since the convulsion of nature that had sent down the landslide; and he knew he had met with another change, and a more dangerous one.

Down he went, slipping, sliding, not as rapidly as at first, but none the less surely.

He spread out his hands and sought to catch some projecting knob of rock, but his fingers found none. Even in the agony of the moment he noted that the quantity of water passing down the rapids was now but small, and the noise of its fall scarcely reached his ears.

The descent lasted for but a few moments.

Then, he landed in a pool of water, which broke the shock of a fall of a dozen feet or more.

After that his feet were on a solid rock, from which there was no danger of slipping, and he stood there without attempting to move until he had collected the wits which had about deserted him.

His clothing was wet, but of course his arms were all right, with their waterproof cartridges; and he had a box containing taper matches, which, when closed, was hermetically sealed.

He managed to light a match, and looked around.

The water had found its sunken channel, and was sluggishly moving on, as it had been doing above ground. He could almost imagine himself in the canyon which he knew was above him.

He looked back at the trail down which he had come, and shook his head.

"It is easier to go forward than to go back. That last plump of a dozen feet shuts the door against me that way. There is not a chance to work up between the walls, since they are too wide apart to offer a foothold. There is but one thing to do—go forward. It is a weary journey but there may be an opening somewhere that will be more practicable. If not, I can die."

The little taper burned to his finger ends, sputtered, and then went out. He was alone again in the darkness.

The journey under ground was full of a dreadful sameness. The way was clear-cut, and he followed it without trouble, yet there was all the time the chance that the rocks might open again beneath him, and give another, and a fatal, tumble.

When he had once decided he could not ascend the slope down which he had come, he gave up all thoughts of it, however; and this journey, pursued with grim and silent determination, was his only chance.

True, he might, in the darkness which reigned above as well as below, pass some point where ascent was practicable, but he did not allow himself to dwell on the fear of it; and after a while he knew the sun must have risen, and that light, however faint it might be, would find its way to the underground channel wherever there was an opening.

If ever there was a mortal happy it was Pony Taylor, as he caught a glimpse of the blessed daylight.

When he found a practicable route to the upper air, it seemed as though in him had been wrought the miracle of the ages.

A less powerful man might have failed at last, but after more than once losing all the ground gained, and at the expense of some pretty severe bruises, he won his way upward at last, and threw himself down, temporarily exhausted, on the dry bed of the upper canyon.

The reaction was only temporary. After a short rest he arose and moved onward.

He did not believe he had left Mr. Lyons and Edna behind him. They had certainly not fallen as he had done; and his best course was to go ahead, trusting to find them in the neighborhood of the very place to which he had intended to lead them.

A fortunate decision it was, since in this way he lost no time, and was enabled to see something of the movements of Ready Rank and Red Larry before the sun went down.

When the darkness came he started to go with in the lines. He could guess at the situation of affairs, and knew he must use caution in double portions.

When Bedrock stole away, Taylor saw him; as he hoped, without being seen. He dropped in behind, and followed like a shadow.

At times he was within speaking distance, but he did not care to reveal himself until he could discover what was the intention of the man of rags. Bedrock had a way of dodging the truth which would render questioning useless, and Pony wanted to see what he really intended doing.

When Primrose disappeared through the well-hidden entrance to the underground passage, Pony was as much surprised as the rustler was later on. He followed, though, without hesitation.

Within the passage all was silent, and he was afraid to light a match. He knew nothing of the way and his experience of the previous night had made him cautious.

Thus it happened that he missed the route to the place where Bedrock was interviewing the surprised prisoners, and stumbled straight on.

The path began to widen, but it did not seem to be the right one. Behind there was something like the murmur of voices, and he made sure he had passed Bedrock on the way. He turned and went back.

This time he found the true route to the prison; and he did not know the birds had flown. From that side the opening of the stone door was simplicity itself. Had Bitters and Dandy Dave waited another moment he would have saved them trouble by lighting a match himself.

He was more amused than alarmed at the meeting, but when the two made their retreat he faced about, well knowing it would not be long before some one else would be on the spot, even if the frightened guards did not recover their courage.

He closed the door carefully behind him, but did not at once hurry away. So long as he remained close at hand, and there was no movement on his rear, he knew he was master of the situation. But one person could pass through that opening at a time, and he had in his hands as many lives as there would probably be in the party on the other side.

He heard something of what was going on, and knew the men there were at fault, though he thought it possible they would not remain so. He would have waited and watched for a while to make sure if he had not heard other voices which he recognized, in the passage behind him.

Edna was softly calling to Mr. Lyons, and he was answering her.

The fact was, Lyons could not make up his mind to follow the advice of the man who had not only rescued him once, but, if he only had known it, would have provided for his future.

"If we follow his advice, it may be, and most likely will be, but to offer ourselves an easy prey to his friends. Even if the rough-spoken man is honest I know the fellow who overheard is the tool of Doctor Rice, as he has been calling himself, though it now seems he is a man notorious for his wickedness under another name. Better to try another route, or even to remain near where we are. If it can be reached, I suspect we are near the goal for which we have been striving."

So he reasoned; and when he saw Bedrock and the little gambler striding away, he turned, and hurriedly dragged Edna back into the shadows.

Unfortunately, as it seemed, it was not so easy to shape a course in any other direction save that pointed out by Ragged Rufe. The plain across which he had pointed lay before them, broad and shining, but behind them and to either side, lay the rocky hills, dark and mysterious.

They lingered, looked this way and that, attempted to find a path that would lead them to some haven of refuge, where they might at least remain for a time in hiding; and at last, by the merest chance, came back to the overhanging rock, and the passage opening into the hillside.

Just then they heard voices on the night air, that seemed to be coming nearer. In sudden desperation they entered the passage once more, and plunged blindly forward in the darkness.

Before they had gone far they became separated, one following the natural rift in the rocks, while the other turned into the artificial passage. It was then that Pony Taylor heard their voices, and hurrying toward them called them by name.

There was no hesitation then.

Lyons had forgotten his suspicions, or had them entirely dispelled by what he had heard Bedrock say, and greeted his guide with unalloyed pleasure.

"What lucky wind blew you this way?" was his question, as he clasped Pony's hand in the darkness.

"I had feared you were dead until a few moments ago, and did not expect to see you soon, in any event."

"Not dead; but I have been treading monstrous nigh to the borders of the grim monster's kingdom. This is but the merest chance. Had

I not followed a prowler, without the least idea he could bring me to you, it is more than likely we never would have met."

"Perhaps he was the man who set us free. He talked as though he had seen you; but advised us to retreat at once, saying that you would probably join us. I did not altogether trust him, and it was well I remained. Since we have met I consider our troubles are almost over. Do you not think this place fits into the map of the region of the Sunken River?"

"Only too well. Bedrock, who has spent the last twenty years alternately mining and tramping, knows altogether too much about it; and if any treasure was ever hidden here, it looks as though it had been found by some of these men who have visited the spot. Yet Red Larry seems never to have found it—though now that he suspects the existence of a passage here, there is no telling how soon he will."

"Then our escape has been discovered?"

"Yes, and they are going over, stone by stone, the wall that lies next to the hill. Something has convinced them you did not make your exit by the door."

"Ah, what is that?"

Edna had been silent. Not but what her joy at meeting with the sport was not as great as that of her father, but that she was content to allow him to talk. Looking back she had seen a momentary glow in the passage behind.

It looked as though a door had been opened, and then the light on the other side suddenly extinguished.

"Ah, they have found it, then," was Taylor's reply, when she had told what she had seen.

"Larry is on the study whether to follow with torches, or try a still hunt in the dark. Either way he will not take us without a fight for it."

He hurried them away, and at the intersection with the underground rift, turned to the left, and burrowed further under the hill.

They were none too soon in the movement, for a light gleamed along the passage as they left it, and Red Larry, with half a dozen men, came rushing along, silent, but in deadly earnest.

Chance or instinct made them follow the same course as that taken by the fugitives, and they were moving the more rapidly. Suddenly they came upon Taylor and his charges, turned at bay.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VENGEANCE WINS.

"Go slow there, Mister Man. Until we know who you are, and what you want, there is a deadline in front of us, and if you try to pass it you drop."

The stern challenge of Taylor brought Red Larry and his men to a sudden halt. They had not heard the footsteps of the fugitives, and their presence was a surprise.

What they saw as they looked around was another.

The rift had opened out into a crater-like bowl, set in the mountain.

Of course, they could not take in the exact conformation of the place, but Larry knew he had reached a spot the existence of which he had never even suspected; and as he looked upward he could see the stars shining, and a trace-line where, high above, rocks and sky touched.

All this he took in at a glance. Then, his gaze went back to the one man who, with weapons extended, was coolly awaiting his answer.

It was not hard to guess who he was.

This was no ghost, but the man who had dropped into the underground channel of the Sunken River, and by some miraculous chance had been saved. He it must have been that rescued his prisoners; and this spot they were in was the lost mine for which he was searching.

This last thought made it the worse for Pony's chances of a bloodless victory. The wonder was that Larry did not try a snap shot for answer.

Instead of that he was cooler than usual, and a little slower with his pistols.

"You will find us just what you want us, as long as you play us fair; but you want to get off the roof and come down to business without a bit of nonsense. It don't take much to make me tired; and if you look around you may see the advantages are all on our side of the line."

"No, I don't see it. We have the position, and I hold the drop besides. If there are any terms to be made I will be the one to name them. You have been trying some funny business with these people, who are under my care. If I did right I would shoot first and argue the matter with your corpse; but I am a little slow in starting on the war-path, unless I am crowded hard from the jump. You are just as bad a man as Ready Rank, and if I am not mistaken there is no good blood between you two."

"What has that got to do with it, young man?"

The bringing in of Rank's name was a puzzle. "Only this. Were it not that I am sure he is on your trail I would not parley with you. No agreement you would make would be binding on you, and the only safety for us would be over your dead body. But Rank feels the same way, and you and he might as well fight it out, and save me the trouble of putting you on my record. I assure you, I will be willing to deal

with the survivor, but it seems like a sin to have to kill you both."

In the most matter-of-fact tone was all this said; but Larry was sure there was something behind it all. Taylor was playing for time—yet, what good could he think a few moments more or less would do him?

"If there is any more of that I'll finish with you on the spot; and be ready for Rank when he comes, too. You are up a little higher in the world, but you make all the better mark, and no matter who goes down at your shots there will not be enough left of you to talk about when our rush is over. Throw those pistols down, and step this way. The other two are all right, and we can trust them not to do the fool act; but we take no chances with you. Keep him covered, boys, and if he pulls a trigger down them all!"

Had Taylor been alone he would not have quailed at the thought of fighting the gang. By the time the trouble was over he would have given a very good account of himself.

But, from the first, he was anxious Mr. Lyons and Edna should not be there when the crash came. They had followed him mechanically when he had taken this position, and now, at a whispered direction, were trying to steal away.

They had already made some progress, and would soon be where they could risk a more rapid flight, but there was no doubt Larry had reached the end of his patience, and that the fight must come now.

Taylor's finger was already tightening when there was a movement on which he had not counted. The two torches carried by Larry's men were suddenly dashed downward, and extinguished, while a storm of bullets swept over the place he was supposed to be.

The unexpected act confused the aim of the sport, but he knew it before a shot of his had been wasted. At the same time his finger relaxed he flung himself down, so that he remained unscathed.

"If they don't hear my tools they will think I have gone under, sure. If they do that, and come closer, I will want nothing better. I can make it so lively for them here they will not think of anything in the world but Pony Taylor, and how to down him."

So he thought, and lay there expecting a rush.

The rush did not come.

Instead of that, there was an interval of complete silence, broken at last by a cry from the lips of Edna.

Larry had detected the skulking figures stealing away, and had sprung forward in pursuit.

"Ah, ladybird! I have you again!" he chuckled, as his gripe tightened, and he felt sure she was fairly in his grasp.

"This time I'll swear to it you don't get away until this little matter is settled for good and all. By that time, perhaps you won't think of going."

He raised her clear off the ground as he spoke, and moved back to the spot he had but lately left.

"You want to look before you shoot, young man," he sternly shouted.

"You can't reach me except through her, and you are hardly ready for that. Don't try to play it fine on us, but hold your hands up and come down. We have you foul, and mean to keep you that way."

As he spoke one of the torches was again raised, and whether it was waved into light again, or was lit by a match, it flared up enough to show that Red Larry spoke but the truth. He was holding the girl up without any apparent effort, and he was most effectually screened.

The sport saw his stratagem had failed, and that the men did not intend to come near him while he was armed.

He saw, too, that for some reason of their own they were anxious to take him alive. Probably they thought he knew all about the hidden mine, and could be forced to reveal its secrets.

If that was the case they were of course under a disadvantage, to a certain extent, though it did not increase his chances for getting away in the long run. There was one other game he might play.

"I don't give up my tools, even to the best man living; but I am willing to put them where they can do no harm if you give me your word you will put that lady down, and treat me square."

"That depends on what you call square," answered Larry, convinced the young man was weakening.

"You are our prisoner, and will be until we know you don't want more than your share of the boodle."

"All right then," responded Taylor, carelessly thrusting away his weapons.

"Come and take me."

He smiled, as he spoke, and seemed perfectly unsuspecting of danger but every nerve was strung to its highest tension while waiting for the men to advance. He had planned to play on Larry something like his own game.

But even as two or three men with pistols poised were beginning to move forward a man

who had been left behind on guard came running at full speed down the passage, while behind him pursued half a dozen men, at their head Rank the rustler, and Billy Barton.

In the rear of all skulked Bedrock. He had been playing a lone hand for some time, and he did not want to lose the advantage it was giving him.

"Bless my eyes!" he thought, as he went along past the spot where the tunnel branched off.

"Thar's bin a shakin' up ov dry bones hyer. Looks ez though I ain't ez sharp ez I thort meself. Thar must 'a' bin a wall laid up hyerabouts w'ich ther airtquake hez shooked down. Ef I didn't wanter lay low, keep dark, an' see w'ot's comin' next, I'd reely shout."

Red Larry was between two fires; but had it not been for Pony Taylor at his rear, he would have held the advantage over Rank, since the rustlers could only pass out of the rift in single file.

As he heard the cry of his approaching scout, that the rustlers were coming, he did not hesitate, treacherous though the act might be.

Pony Taylor had no weapons in his hands, and had apparently yielded himself a prisoner, yet Larry gave one glance at the rift, and then threw up his hand and sent at him what he thought was certain death. He had dropped a man from a galloping horse at twice the distance before now, and with less time to dwell on his aim.

He forgot the girl on his shoulder.

She had not lost her wits, and divined his purpose as soon as it was formed.

With one sweep of her hand she thrust his wrist to one side, and the bullet flattened itself on the rocks.

He was raving mad, but there was no time to show it.

"Fling your torch over at the opening, and shoot down every man who passes its glare!"

Sharply he gave the order, and then, still holding Edna, crouched low. Taylor could no longer see him, even if the girl had not shielded him; and he wanted, now, to take Ready Rank first of all. He saw a figure he knew must belong to the rustler leap out from the rift, and this time his bullet, aimed with inconceivable quickness, went home.

Rank pitched heavily forward, and Red Larry uttered a shout of triumph. Edna was no longer struggling, for she had felt the inutilty of attempting to escape, and scarcely knew which of these men she had the most to fear from.

"Take them as they come, take them as they come!" shouted Larry.

"Do your work clean, and wipe them all out!"

He did not see a lithe figure, crouching low, and stealing around the edge of the rocks; he was waiting for the rush which he was sure would come.

Then the little gambler gave a great bound, and there was a feeble flash of a blade in the waning light.

"This time," hissed Billy Barton, "vengeance wins, and the steel goes home."

The arm holding Edna relaxed, and the form of the stricken man swayed heavily under the shock. Without waiting to see the effect of his blow the little man caught up Edna, and dashed straight on toward Taylor.

"Hold hard, Taylor! I am your solid friend; and we'll have to work this thing together. Both of the bosses are down, but their tigers may show their teeth yet."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BEDROCK MAKES HIS COUP.

As Billy Barton took his place beside Taylor, the torch gave its last flicker and went out. They could dimly see the figures of the men crouching near, looking this way and that, ready for fight, or panic and flight, as the thing happened.

Then came the rush of Ready Rank's men, for a moment delayed, but never abandoned. It was a hand-to-hand struggle of maddened men, who might have fled if they had known how; and who fought blindly because they were not ordered to stop.

Creeping gingerly behind the rush, Bedrock made his way to the side of the fallen rustler. He found him more by luck than judgment, and coolly felt for the beating of his heart first of all. If he was dead, it might not be worth while to carry him off the field of battle.

Ready Rank was alive, though hard hit. It might be he would die in another minute, but of that Primrose was willing to take his chances. He gathered up the fallen man in his arms as though he had been an infant, and bore him out of the crater into the rift, halting after he had gone perhaps a rod.

"Pity them fellers hez ter waste ther energys in ther dark. They are willin' ter hev a reel comfortable time, but ther darkness are ag'in' 'em. Mebbe they'd stay longer ef I shed a leetle light on ther subjeck. 'Twon't do natter bit ov hurt ter try, an' it may help me own steps along."

He fumbled in his pockets for a moment, found what he wanted, lit a blue-light, and slinking back to the opening into the crater, tossed the light among the struggling combatants.

"Thar, Pony, you kin see ter pick 'em off ez emparshul ez yer chooses, an' I hope you'll keep 'em bizzy tell I git outen range. I'm a-workin' fur big wages, an' I'll do w'ot I kin ter yearn me money."

He glided back to where he had left Rank, and holding him tenderly, made his way to the open air.

Two men were there, watching the hopped horses, and listening in something of a tremor for further sounds from the conflict they knew had been going on.

Bedrock had no use for them, though he did not wish them any particular harm. He had his own opinion about Tommy Twofeet and his pard, and thought he could dispose of them. Gently he dropped his burden, and then with a revolver in either hand he rushed out, shooting and yelling as he came.

He was right on them before they were aware of his coming; and they did not wait to see who he was, or how many were behind him, but took to their heels at once. According to the rate at which they started, there was not much danger of their stopping soon, and Bedrock for the present had the field to himself.

"Now, Ready, I'm going ter do ther squar' thing by yer, ez fur ez are consistenrt. But, fu'st ov all, I must do jestiss ter Bedrock. Ef you hev ary 'portant papers 'bout lyer pusson, they hed better be in ther han's ov yer 'zeckyter, which are me, Ragged Rufe. A leetle more light would be a heap sight nicer, but daylight are a-comin' fast."

As well as he could, Rufus had been examining the wound, and temporarily bandaging it. The bullet had gone through and through the body of the rustler, and it seemed impossible he should recover, yet there was no telling of what the well-seasoned man was capable.

Now, the tramp looked through his pockets for the papers he had spoken of.

There was no sign of them there, and Bedrock next turned his attention to the valise strapped to the rustler's saddle.

He found no such papers there as he was looking for; but something else, at the sight of which he gave a whistle that might be of surprise, and came back to the wounded man. Over him he bent, peering into his face for a little, and then carefully tugging at the mustache which shaded the hard, firm mouth of Ready Rank.

It came off in his fingers, and Bedrock, by the aid of the suit of clothes he had discovered in the rustler's valise, had penetrated the triple disguise. Ready Rank was not only Doctor Rice, but he was Jack Harper as well.

"Pon me soul, this complerates matters," he muttered, once more examining the man, in whom he thought he began to see signs of returning consciousness.

"Ef he hez them papers they're like ez not back at ther Flume. Kin I git him back ter p'int 'em out fur sheer grattertude, or must I leave him hyer, an' go look fur 'em meself? Blame ef I don't hole on to him er see him croak; An' ther fu'st thing ter do are ter git outen hyer."

It was as well that Rank had not sense to comprehend the intentions of the man who bent over him. No one but Bedrock would have thought it possible to get the wounded man back to Mineral Bar alive. Perhaps he had little hopes, but was willing to make the effort.

"Fu'st, fur the nearest water, an' then fur ther home run. It's hyer whar ther jugs ov benzine are goin' ter come in at. Gentle stimmylants kin kerry a man like Rank through a heap, an' jest so I kin perdoose him livin', Johnny 'll give me ther run ov ther house."

In all his life Uncle Bedrock had never undertaken a harder contract, yet he carried it faithfully through to the end, and came up out of the desert marches with Ready Rank living, and in Jack Harper's clothes.

Whether he was in his right mind, it was, for the most of the time, hard to tell.

The wound was not as dangerous, of itself, as had been at first supposed, but fever had set in, and Primrose was pretty sure his man was booked for the other side of the divide. He smuggled him in at the back door of the Flume, and found that in the absence of the rustler things had been running on as usual, with Johnny in charge.

The advent caused some commotion among the *attaches* of the house, but by dint of some hard swearing, and divers dark threats, Bedrock succeeded in impressing on the minds of the men the necessity for keeping the condition of affairs from the outside world. Of course, he installed himself as chief nurse; and waited impatiently for the time to come when he could act.

Toward midnight Rank raised his head, and stared around him.

"Not a bad place for Mazeppa to land at," he muttered.

"It seems as though the old ruffian had me tied to that horse for a thousand years."

"But he stuck to me! If the other curs had been half as good men as he we would be in the lost mine now, and all the treasures of the Sunken River in our buckskins. Six men behind

me, and every one of them a coward, unless it was Billy Barton—and he wasn't a man at all!

"Why, three of us held up the whole of Gordon's Gulch. When I cracked the whip the curs dove into their kennels and stayed there.

And we weren't able for Red Larry and his gang! It's time for me to go out of the damp—if I could only take Pony Taylor along I would die happy."

So he wandered along, and all the time Bedrock was keenly watching him. There was no telling what secrets he might reveal if this was delirium.

"And I remember you, too. Sandy Soakers! Ha, ha! You are old Bedrock, the man who backset Pony Taylor when I was playing the big hand in the robber's roost. I'll forget that, now, for you have stood by me when the rest of the curs would have let me die. Only, you don't take Ready Rank back to be hung. He's dead, long ago, and I'm Jack Harper the man who runs the Flume. What are you going to do about it?"

"That's all right, pard. I'll see you through the mud or lose a wheel. Have me who you want an' it will be all right. But ef you don't know by this time I am ther man yer wants when yer' in a tight pinch thar's no use ter tell yer ov it. Sleep siren, fur ther man wot's watchin' yer slumbers are got up ter stay thar."

"I believe you, my boy. You don't much care what you tie to so there is a chance for fun; and this time you happen to be on the other side. When Pony comes, wake me up and give me my pistol. I'll be ready for him in more ways than one."

"Now's ther time ter make me ten-strike ef it are ter be made," thought Bedrock, a little later, watching the uneasy slumber of the rustler.

There was a secretary in one corner of the room, and to a man of Bedrock's resources the lock was no great defense. A twist or two of the wrist and it was open, and he was running over its contents with the speed of an expert.

"Ah, at last!"

He seized a legal-looking paper and glanced at the few lines of writing on the back.

"Contract between President and Directors of the S. B. O. and K. R. R., and Lewis Stafford."

"The idiot! To be leaving a little fortune like that to knock around here, and go traipsing off in search of the cache on the Sunken River! Horace DeLangdon, you are in luck once more, and when Stafford hands over the reward you will once more take your place among the nations of the earth. Oh, if I had a million shares of the S. B. O. and K., how quick I would sell them. When this comes to hand they can't back out of the bargain, and Lewis will have the double-cinch on."

In his excitement the old fellow had dropped his uncouth style of speech, and talked like a different man. Those who knew him best were aware he could do that upon occasion.

The excitement lasted only for a moment.

Then he thrust away the contract among his rags, closed the secretary, and slouched up to Rank's bedside, once more the same old tramp.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ROUND UP.

It was not the first time the pyrotechnics which Bedrock sometimes carried had come in to the aid of his game. The burning of the blue-light prevented the retreat which would otherwise have been made, and the two leaderless bands continued the fight like savages for a time.

When nearly every man had received a wound Pony Taylor thought it was as well to say a word.

"Here, you! Hands up, all! There are four of us here, with the drop on you, and we mean business. This thing has got to be stopped or we come in and slaughter you all. How is it? Peace, or war?"

The sound of his voice was all that was needed to bring the fray to a close, since there were only a couple of men there able to continue it, and they were ready to quit.

Then Taylor, who had been watching Billy Barton all the while, turned squarely to face him.

"And you—are you taking up Rank's game where he left off; or is there to be a truce between us? You drew Edna out of the press or I would have had you down on sight."

"I came with Ready Rank, but not to back his game, whatever he may have thought. I have had vengeance on the man"—he pointed at the body of Red Larry—"who killed Paul Prindle, though there may still be an unsettled score with the rustler, if he lives. I saw him go down, and the man who calls himself Sandy Soakers dragged him away."

"Who, then, are you?"

"I am—Paul Prindle's widow."

The answer was given in a lower tone, and one that had softened in the speaking of it. Without doubt it came from the lips of a woman.

There was a sharp cry from Edna; an exclamation of astonishment from Mr. Lyons.

"Impossible! And yet—that voice! Paul

Prindle's wife came West to search for him, learned that he was dead, and was lost returning on the Rising Star."

Lyons had hold of the wrist of the little gambler, and was staring into his face, trying to read its lines by the little light beginning to straggle down from above.

"Paul Prindle's wife never went on board of the Rising Star. She remained to execute a vengeance which, if long deferred, came at last. I would have saved you all the knowledge of this, since the bitterness of the struggle was over; but it is the truth, and you know it. We have found, too, the hidden mine of which he wrote us, and if the treasure, even, be gone, there may be a chance here to work out a fortune. If so, let the wealth be for you and Edna, and the man who has done his best to serve you on the dangerous trail."

The hardness of the disguise she had so long assumed had blunted somewhat the feelings of Paul Prindle's widow, but she knew the struggle that must be going on in the mind of Edna, and was striving to retain her own self-possession for the sake of the daughter who for so many years had ceased to know her.

"It must be, then," said the girl, speaking feebly, "that you are my mother."

The wounded men had been cared for, and the men who were able to do mischief had been disarmed. Daylight was streaming into the crater-like recess, and the four were searching for traces of the old-time presence of Paul Prindle. When they found the spot where he had unearthed a pocket they found something else.

There were nuggets there, done up in a buckskin, which might be worth some few thousand dollars. There also was a letter.

The writing was well preserved, and it told the story of his strange discovery of a hidden mine, spoke of the vein from which wealth could be dug, and of the pocket in which were buried the nuggets which would furnish him the means to carry on his work. The letter went on to say:

"On second thoughts, and in spite of what I have written you, I have determined to leave here but a fraction of the solid gold I have found. The nuggets will make perhaps ten thousand dollars, and if anything happens to me there is still a fortune in the mine, difficult though it may be of access. With a careful, honest partner, who knows what mining and the West are, I would not ask better provision for my wife and daughter. If I never see them again, and this meets their eyes, they will be assured of my love."

Here the story naturally ends.

With Red Larry, the actual slayer of Paul Prindle, killed, and Ready Rank nigh to death's door, vengeance could claim no more; and with a cool hand like Pony Taylor to counsel and assist, Mr. Lyons and Edna had no need to fear for their future, even if "Billy Barton" had not learned ways of wisdom far beyond the average of womanhood while on the trail of the men who had robbed and murdered her husband, and would have stolen the balance of the fortune in which she should have had a share. She had watched somewhat over Edna at the Bar, and it was a word she had said to Mordecai that had induced the Jew to exhibit his unparalleled generosity when Pony negotiated the loan.

The rush that followed the opening of the mine near the Sunken River is a part of history. While other fortunes were made, there was none like that won by Pony Taylor; for, had he not gold, and Edna also?

In Mineral Bar there was always something of a mystery about the closing of the Flume; and whether Jack Harper was living or dead was a matter of debate among those who had known him. He vanished, and his assistants with him. But, when a man came over from Spur City with a bill of sale for the saloon and its fixtures, there was no one to say nay to his taking possession.

Bedrock vanished as quietly; but he reappeared shortly thereafter in Frisco, gorgeous in purple and fine linen, talking like a prince, and hand in glove with Lew Stafford, the great capitalist. He lingered long enough to see the man of railroads get the "double-cinch" on the S. B. O. and K., and complete the great combination on which his heart had been set. Then, Horace DeLangdon, as he was now called, turned his face to the East, and went back to meet his wife and daughter.

THE END.

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28 Abe Colt, the Crow-Killer.
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253 Joe Buck of Angels and His Boy Pard.
447 New York Nat. A Tale of Tricks and Traps in Gotham.
458 New England Nick; or, The Fortunes of a Foundling.
464 Nimble Nick, the Circus Prince.
498 Toots Ted, the Arizona Sport.
510 Cool Colorado, the Half-Breed Detective.
518 Cool Colorado in New York.

BY COL. A. F. HOLT.

399 Black Buckskin; or, The Masked Men of Death Canyon.
419 Kenneth, the Knife-King.
435 Little Lightfoot, the Pilot of the Woods.
528 The Dandy Sport; or, The King Pin Conspirator.
673 Headlight Harry's Hazard; or, The Lightning Express Detective.
691 Headlight Harry's Haul.
727 Headlight Harry's Siren.
759 Headlight Harry's Heritage.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

67 Patent-Leather Joe; or, Old Rattlesnake, the Charmer.
175 Captain Arizona; or, Patent-Leather Joe's Big Game.
193 Captain Mask; or, Patent-Leather Joe's Defeat.
219 Despard, the Duellist; or, The Mountain Vampires.
338 A Tough Boy; or, The Dwarf's Revenge.
368 Little Tornado; or, The Outcasts of the Glen.
373 Little Jingo; or, The Queer Pard.
388 Little Oh-my; or, Caught in His Own Trap.
401 Little Shoo-Fly; or, A Race for a Ranch.
408 Little Leather-Breeches; or, Old Jumbo's Curse.
431 Little Ah Sin; or, The Curse of Blood.
451 Colorado Kate. A Tale of the mines.
480 Three Jolly Pards.
517 Jim Gladden's Deputy.
527 The Jolly Pards to the Rescue.
547 Sandy Andy; or, A Good Man Down.
556 Lariat Lil; or, The Cast for a Life.
574 Old Wensel-top, the Man with the Dega.
593 Keen Clem, the Ranch Imp.
599 Jim Dandy, the No-Name Sport.
618 Billy Blazes; or, The Skeleton's Legacy.
635 Oklahoma Hi the Blue-Coat Scout.
643 Happy Harry's Big Find.
664 Cheeky Charley the Special.

BY BRACEBRIDGE HEMYNG.

89 Island Jim; or, The Pet of the Family.
91 The Captain of the Club; or, The Rival Athletes.
101 Jack Harkaway in New York.

BY CHARLES MORRIS.

118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
123 Phil Hardy, the Boat Boy.
126 Picayune Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
143 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
152 Black Bess, Will Wildfire's Racer.
157 Mike Merry the Harbor Police Boy.
162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
213 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
225 Sam Charcoal the Premium Dorky.
235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
262 The Young Sharps; or, Rollicking Mike's Hot Trail.
274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
355 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
484 Wild Dick Rockett.
501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.
627 Tom Bruce of Arkansas; or, The Wolf in the Fold.
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- 525 Fresh Frank, the Derringer Daisy.
- 508 The Dude from Denver.
- 478 Pinnacle Pete; or, The Fool from Way Back.
- 459 Major Sunshine, the Man of Three Lives.
- 429 Hair Trigger Tom of Red Bend.
- 402 Snapshot Sam; or, The Angels' Flat Racket.
- 396 The Piper Detective; or, The Gilt Edge Gang.
- 375 Royal George, the Three in One.
- 353 Three Handsome Sports; or, The Combination.
- 344 Double Shot Dave of the Left Hand.
- 333 Derringer Dick, the Man with the Drop.
- 300 A Sport in Spectacles; or, Bad Time at Bunco.
- 268 Magic Mike, the Man of Frills.
- 229 Captain Cutsleeve; or, The Little Sport.
- 214 The Two Cool Sports; or, Gertie of the Gulch.
- 192 The Lightning Sport.
- 182 Hands Up; or, The Knights of the Canyon.
- 160 Soft Hand, Sharp; or, The Man with the Sand.
- 145 Pistol Pards; or, The Silent Sport from Cinnabar.

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- 614 The Showman Detective; or, The Mad Magician.
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- 445 Journeyman John, the Champion.
- 412 Larry Locke, the Man of Iron.
- 406 Old Pop Hicks, Showman.
- 378 John Armstrong, Mechanic.
- 326 The Whitest Man in the Mines.
- 310 The Marshal of Satanstown; or, The League.
- 303 Top-Notch Tom, the Cowboy Outlaw.
- 295 Old Cross-Eye, the Maverick-Hunter.
- 290 The Lost Corvette; or, Blakeley's Last Cruise.
- 284 The Three Frigates; or, Old Ironsides' Revenge.
- 277 The Saucy Jane, Privateer.
- 272 Seth Slocum, Railroad Surveyor.
- 265 Old Double-Sword; or, Pilots and Pirates.
- 253 A Yankee Cossack; or, The Queen of the Nihilists.
- 247 Alligator Ike; or, The Secret of the Everglade.
- 242 The Fog Devil; or, The Skipper of the Flash.
- 230 The Flying Dutchman of 1880.
- 225 The Mad Hussars; or, The O's and the Mac's.
- 215 Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys.
- 211 Colonel Plunger; or, The Unknown Sport.
- 206 One Eye, the Cannoneer.
- 193 The Man in Red; or, The Ghost of the Old Guard.
- 187 The Death's Head Cuirassiers.
- 174 The Phantom Knights.
- 159 Red Ruffier, the Archer.
- 132 Nemo, King of the Tramps.
- 115 The Severed Head; or, The Castle Coucy Secret.
- 108 The Duke of Diamonds.
- 98 The Rock Rider; or, The Spirit of the Sierra.
- 96 Double Death; or, The Spy of Wyoming.
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- 65 The Red Rajah; or, The Scourge of the Indies.
- 39 The Russian Spy; or, The Starry Cross Brothers.

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- 619 Kit Bandy & Co., the Border Detectives.
- 148 One-Armed Alf, the Giant Hunter.
- 137 Long Beard, the Giant Spy.
- 99 The Giant Rifleman; or, Wild Camp Life.
- 51 Red Rob, the Boy Road-Agent.
- 48 Idaho Tom, the Young Outlaw of Silverland.
- 46 Bowie-Knife Ben, the Nor'west Hunter.
- 44 Old Dan Rackback, the Great Extirminator.
- 43 Dakota Dan, the Reckless Ranger.
- 7 Death-Notch, the Destroyer.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

- 583 Captain Adair, the Cattle King.
- 567 Captain Midnight, the Man of Craft.
- 544 The Back to Back Pards.
- 522 The Champion Three.
- 502 Bareback Buck, the Centaur of the Plains.
- 472 Six Foot St; or, The Man to "Tie To."
- 431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.
- 404 Silver Sid; or, A "Daisy" Bluff.
- 380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.
- 359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.
- 338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
- 299 Three of a Kind; or, Dick, Despard and the Sport.
- 280 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.
- 251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron D'spard.
- 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
- 171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
- 114 The Gentleman from Pike.
- 80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.
- 54 Always on Hand; or, The Foot-Hills Sport.
- 29 Tiger Dick, Faro King; or, The Cashier's Crime.
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- 484 Captain Ready, the Red Ransomer.
- 431 The Silent Detective; or, The Bogus Nephew.
- 456 The Demon Steer.
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- 118 The Burglar Captain; or, The Fallen Star.
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- 604 The Detective in Rags; or, The Grim Shadower.
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- 711 Dan Damon, the Gilt-Edge Detective.
- 701 Silver Steve, the Branded Sport.
- 694 Gideon Grip, the Secret Shadower.
- 684 Velvet Van, the Mystery Shadower.
- 673 The Dude Desperado.
- 671 Jason Clew, the Silk-Handed Ferret.
- 664 Monk Morel, the Man-Hunter.
- 654 Sol Sphinx, the Ferret Detective.
- 649 Red Pard and Yellow.
- 608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.
- 592 Captain Sid, the Shasta Ferret.
- 579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.
- 569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.
- 559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
- 550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.
- 543 The Magnate Detective.
- 532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.
- 523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.
- 512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
- 505 Phil Fox, the Gentle Spotter.
- 496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
- 487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.
- 480 Hawkspear, the Man with a Secret.
- 478 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
- 460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
- 453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
- 447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
- 441 The California Sharp.
- 434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
- 421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
- 413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
- 407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
- 400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
- 392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
- 382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
- 374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
- 365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
- 352 The Desperate Dozen.
- 347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
- 340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
- 335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
- 321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
- 294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
- 278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.

BY WM. G. PATTEN.

- 715 Double-Voice Dan on Deck.
- 702 Double-Voice Dan, the Always-on-Deck Detective.
- 696 Double-Voice Dan, the Go-it Alone Detective.
- 689 The Sparkler Sharp.
- 676 Hurricane Hal, the Cowboy Hotspur.
- 669 Old True Blue, the Trusty.
- 663 The Giant Sport; or, Sold to Satan.
- 656 Old Ping Ugly, the Rough and Ready.
- 648 Gold Glove Gid, the Man of Grit.
- 641 Aztec Jack, the Desert Nomad.
- 631 Colonel Cool, the Santa Fe Sharp.
- 602 Captain Nameless, the Mountain Mystery.
- 571 Old Dismal, the Range Detective.
- 545 Hustler Harry, the Cowboy Sport.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON.

- 323 Hotspur Hugh; or, The Banded Brothers.
- 311 Heavy Hand; or, The Marked Men.
- 305 Silver-Plated Sol, the Montana Rover.
- 291 Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck.
- 285 Lightning Bolt, the Canyon Terror.
- 276 Texa; Chick, the Southwest Detective.
- 271 Stonest, of Big Nugget Bend.
- 266 Leopard Luke, the King of Horse-Thieves.
- 253 Iron-Armed Abe, the Hunchback Destroyer.
- 258 Bullet Head, the Colorado Bravo.
- 245 Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.
- 237 Long-Haired Max; or, The Black League.
- 227 Buckshot Ben, the Man-Hunter of Idaho.
- 223 Canyon Dave, the Man of the Mountain.
- 219 The Scorpion Brothers; or, Mad Tom's Mission.
- 202 Cactus Jack, the Giant Guide.
- 194 Don Sombrero, the California Road Gent.
- 176 Lady Jaguar, the Robber Queen.

BY SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam."

- 511 Paint Pete, the Prairie Patrol.
- 371 Gold Buttons; or, The Up Range Pards.
- 358 The Prince of Pan Out.
- 342 Blanco Bill, the Mustang Monarch.
- 328 King Kent; or, The Bandits of the Basin.
- 323 The Crimson Coyotes; or, Nita, the Nemesis.
- 309 Raybold, the Rattling Ranger.
- 301 Bowlder Bill; or, The Man from Taos.
- 293 Stampede Steve; or, The Doom of the Double.
- 287 Dandy Dave and his Horse, White Stocking.
- 282 The Merciless Marauders; or, Carl's Revenge.
- 273 Mountain Mose, the Gorge Outlaw.
- 269 The Bayou Bravo; or, The Terrible Trail.
- 264 The Crooked Three.
- 256 Double Dan, the Dastard; or, The Pirates.
- 250 The Rough Riders; or, Sharp Eye, the Scourge.
- 244 Merciless Mart, the Man Tiger of Missouri.
- 239 The Terrible Trio; or, The Angel of the Army.
- 235 Rocky Mountain Al; or, The Wolf of the Range.
- 221 Desperate Duke, the Guadalupe "Galoot."
- 217 The Serpent of El Paso; or, Frontier Frank.
- 212 The Frazos Tigers; or, The Minute Men.
- 204 Big Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat.
- 199 Diamond Dick, the Dandy from Denver.
- 195 The Lone Star Gambler; or, Magnolia's Maid.
- 191 The Terrible Tonkaway; or, Old Rocky's Pards.
- 186 The Black Bravo; or, The Tonkaway's Triumph.
- 178 Dark Dashwood, the Desperate.
- 90 Wild Will, the Mad Ranchero.
- 3 Kit Carson, Jr., the Crack Shot.

BY COL. THOMAS H. MONSTERY.

- 332 Spring-Heel Jack; or, The Masked Mystery.
- 282 Fighting Tom, the Terror of the Troughs.
- 262 Champion Sam; or, The Monarchs of the Show.
- 169 Corporal Cannon, the Man of Forty Duels.
- 157 Mourad, the Mameluke; or, The Three Swordmasters.
- 150 El Rubio Bravo, King of the Swordsmen.
- 143 The Czar's Spy; or, The Nihilist League.
- 126 The Demon Duelist; or, The League of Steel.
- 82 Iron Wrist, the Swordmaster.

BY NED BUNTLINE.

- 657 Long Tom, the Privateer.
- 633 The Sea Spy.
- 621 The Red Privateer; or, The Midshipman Rover.
- 584 Fire Feather, the Buccaneer King.
- 517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
- 361 Tombstone Dick, the Train Pilot.
- 270 Andros, the Rover; or, The Pirate's Daughter.
- 122 Saul Sabberday, the Idiot Spy.
- 111 The Smuggler Captain; or, The Skipper's Crime.
- 61 Captain Seawaif, the Privateer.
- 23 The Red Warrior; or, The Comanche Lover.
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- 16 The White Wizard; or, The Seminole Prophet.
- 14 Thayendanegea, the Scourge; or, The War-Eagle.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

- 483 Flush Fred, the River Sharp.
- 368 The Canyon King; or, A Price on his Head.
- 348 Dan Dillon, King of Crosscut.
- 337 Old Gabe, the Mountain Tramp.
- 327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.
- 315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.
- 308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.
- 298 Logger Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.
- 289 Flush Fred's Full Hand.
- 274 Flush Fred, the Mississippi Sport.
- 248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.
- 222 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.
- 209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
- 129 Mississippi Mose; or, a Strong Man's Sacrifice.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.

- 267 The White Squaw.
- 234 The Hunter's Feast.
- 228 The Maroon. A Tale of Voodoo and Obeah.
- 213 The Wild Huntress; or, The Squatter.
- 213 The War Trail; or, The Hunt of the Wild Horse.
- 208 The White Chief. A Romance of Mexico.
- 200 The Rifle Rangers; or, Adventures in Mexico.
- 74 The Captain of the Rifles; or, The Lake Queen.
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- 643 Castlemaine, the Silent Sifter.
- 616 Magnus, the Weird Detective.
- 606 The Drop Detective.
- 595 Wellborn, the Upper Crust Detective.
- 582 Joram, the Detective Expert.
- 574 Old Falcon's Double.
- 561 The Thug King; or, The Falcon Detective's Foe.
- 548 Falconbridge, the Sphinx Detective.
- 536 Old Falcon's Foe; or, The Detective's Swell Job.
- 515 Short-Stop Maje, the Diamond Field Detective.
- 509 Old Falcon, the Thunderbolt Detective.
- 501 Springsteel Steve, the Retired Detective.
- 494 The Detective's Spy.
- 485 Rowlock, the Harbor Detective.
- 477 Dead-arm Brandt.
- 457 Malowaring, the Salamander.
- 462 The Circus Detective.
- 451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.
- 444 The Magic Detective; or, The Hidden Hand.
- 424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.
- 386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.

MISCELLANEOUS.

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- 166 Owllet, the Robber Prince. By S. R. Urban.
- 158 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.
- 152 Captain Ironnove, the Counterfeiter Chief.
- 146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.
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- 140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
- 133 Roddy the Rover. By William Carleton.
- 125 The Blacksmith Outlaw. By H. Ainsworth.
- 110 The Silent Rifleman. By H. W. Herbert.
- 102 The Masked Band. By George L. Aiken.
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- 76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.
- 68 The Fighting Trapper. By Capt. J. F. C. Adams.
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661 The Get-There Sharp.
651 Silvertip Steve, the Sky Scraper from Siskiyou.
646 Gopher Gabe, the Unseen Detective.
636 Dandy Darling, Detective.
627 Mossback Moss, the Mountaineer.
617 The Grip Sack Sharp's Even up.
597 Big Bandy, the Brigadier of Brimstone Butte.
588 Sandy Sands, the Sharp from Snap City.
576 Silver-Tongued Sid; or, Grip Sack Sharp's Sweep.
564 The Grip-Sack Sharp; or, The Seraphs of Sodom.
555 Grip-Sack Sid, the Sample Sport.
547 The Buried Detective; or, Saul's Six Sensations.
541 Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve.
535 Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift.
527 Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.
514 Gabe Gunn, the Grizzly from Ginseng.
504 Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba.
496 Rattlepate Rob; or, The Roundhead's Reprisal.
488 The Thoroughbred Sport.
474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.
466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.
458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
450 The Rustler Detective.
443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
438 Oklahoma Nick.
433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Secret Service Spy.
416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
402 The Nameless Sport.
395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
302 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Man 'Way Back.
249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
30 Gospel George; or, Flery Fred, the Outlaw.
28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 714 Gabe Gall, the Gambler from Great Hump.
703 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.
692 Dead-Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.
655 Strawberry Sam, the Man with the Birthmark.
646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.
638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.
623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.
611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.
596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.
585 Dan Dixon's Double.
575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.
563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honey-suckle.
551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.
539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.
531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.
521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.
513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.
506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.
498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.
492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.
486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.
479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.
470 The Duke of Dakota.
463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.
455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.
427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
395 Will Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
279 The Gold Dragoon, or, California Bloodhound.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

- 709 Lodestone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.
695 Singer Sam, the Pilgrim Detective.
688 The River Rustlers.
673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.
666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.
618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
528 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

- 704 Invisible Ivan, the Wizard Detective.
685 The Red-skin Sea Rover.
679 Revello, the Pirate Cruiser; or, The Rival Rovers.
672 The Red Rapier; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.
662 The Jew Detective; or, The Beautiful Convict.
658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
653 The Lasso King's League. A companion Story to "Buck Taylor, the Saddle King."
640 The Rover's Retribution.
635 The Ex Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.
630 The Sea Thief.
625 Red Wings; or, The Gold Seekers of the Bahamas.
615 The Three Buccaneers.
610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.
605 The Shadow Silver Ship.
600 The Silver Ship; or, The Sea Scouts of '76.
593 The Sea Rebel; or, Red Rovers of the Revolution.
587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.
581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.
560 The Man from Mexico.
553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.
546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.
540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.
530 The Savages of the Sea.
524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.
516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.
510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.
493 The Scouts of the Sea.
489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.
482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.
476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, the Red Sea Raider.
469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, the Fugitive Sailor.
457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.
446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
436 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
399 The New Monte Cristo.
393 The Convict Captain.
388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
341 The Sea Desperado.
336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermita.
318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
259 Outlaw and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
253 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trailer.
128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.
2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

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Numbers * are from the pen of Buffalo Bill.

- 710 Buffalo Bill Baffled.
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail.
682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.
649 Buck Taylor, the Saddle King.
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza.
*639 The Gold King; or, Montebello, the Magnificent.
629 Daredeath Dick; or, Buffalo Bill's Daring Role.
*599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pards of the Plains.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
*414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.
*401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
*397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
*394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
382 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or Oath Bound to Custer.
329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
*319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
*304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
*243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
158 The Doomed Dozen; or, Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.
*83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
*52 Death-Tracker, the Chief of Scouts.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 448 Hark Kenton, the Traitor.
186 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena.
156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.
142 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.
117 Dashing Dandy; or, The Hotspur of the Hills.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 708 Joe Phenix's Siren.
700 Joe Phenix's Unknown.
681 Joe Phenix's Specials.
674 Uncle Sun Up, the Born Detective.
670 The Lightweight Detective.
665 The Frisco Detective; or, The Golden Gate Find.
660 The Fresh in Montana.
652 Jac-son Blake, the Bouncer Detective.
647 The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fe.
637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.
632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.
628 Joe Phenix's Combin'.
620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.
613 Keen Billy, the Sport.
607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.
601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.
594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.
586 The Silver Sharp Detective.
577 Tom of California.
570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.
562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.
556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevalier.
537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.
529 The Fresh in New York.
520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.
497 The Fresh in Texas.
490 The Lone Hand in Texas.
475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.
465 The Actor Detective.
461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.
354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
130 Captain Volcano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
101 The Man from New York.
97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.
75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.
72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.
56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.
49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
35 Kentuck the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.
24 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.
33 Overland Kit; or, The Idol of White Pine.
31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.
598 The Dominic Detective.
591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
580 Shadowing a Shadow.
565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
473 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulp from Texas.
436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.

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